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George Toles

This May Hurt a Little

The Art of Humiliation in Film

(opposite page, top) *The Best Years of Our Lives*: Harold Russell and Cathy O'Donnell; (bottom) Melvyn Douglas (left) as Zy, the landlord, and Roman Polanski, in *The Tenant*

Narrative films abound in humiliation scenes. Their structure commonly traces a movement from a scalding exposure (that seems to mark a point of no return) to a partial replenishment of dignity. The hole that has burned open in a character's self-image is usually closed up by a surge of spectator sympathy/identification that has been orchestrated by the director. The camera takes us to the edge of what we can bear to witness of another's writhing in shame, then answers our need for a reprieve, providing some sort of image protection or veiling which we are tempted to regard as our own doing. It is as though our compassion proved the antidote to a character's misery and reclaimed her humanity by warming it in the light of our own. Transparency is terrifying when one is rendered "obvious" to others in the wrong way. Filmed images are able to register, with the force of a drill, this kind of transparency, born of the childhood anxiety that nothing is sufficiently yours to keep hidden from a strong, adult gaze. Film regularly restages moments when someone is effectively reduced to a stammer, to dirty, guilt-stained hands, or to a spreading, visible wetness on pants or dress. At such times there appears to be no way to stave off censorious scrutiny. Anyone with eyes can see to the bottom of one's soul, and it is lined with sores, immutably abject.

How far is it from this sort of transparency effect to that which André Bazin celebrates in his essays on the films of De Sica, where characters are said to be palpably "lit from within" by the director's love for them? Does an image which enfolds some living creature in the security of a generous acceptance depend more heavily on hiddenness (the untransparent) than an image which flays? What, in other words, lies concealed in an image's act of *embracing* a subject, as De Sica's do—without apparent coercion, and allowing room for the subject's separateness, its lonely integrity? And when images are excruciating to watch, is it because things are more out in the open, or is this openness itself a narrowing of range, covering over a field of life-giving connections so that *disconnected* perceptual shocks acquire the force of an absolute? When the camera seems to lose its conscience and go too far in, say, the invasion of privacy, is it reasonable to assume that it is seeing, in its wilful excess, less of a situation rather than more? What, if anything, must the camera gaze suppress or put out of focus in order to lead the viewer to a terrible extremity of "exposure" and strand him there? Extremities might be described, in this context, as places from which there is no clear path back to composure and fellow-feeling. Is it possible that camera images are most true when they refuse solidarity with us, when they proclaim distance and difference above everything that might foster the illusion of our finding ourselves in them? Susan Sontag has suggested that

> photographic images tend to subtract feeling from something we experience at first hand and the feelings they do arouse are, largely, not those we have in real life. Often something disturbs us more in photographed form than it does when we actually experience it. One is vulnerable to disturbing events in the form of photographic images in a way that one is not to the real thing. That vulnerability is part of the distinctive passivity of someone who is a spectator twice over, spectator of events already shaped, first by the participants and second by the image maker.[1]

Yet surely the opposite is also true—that photographic representations of certain kinds of horror stylize and distance in a manner that frees us from the

necessity of disturbed involvement. Our passivity before film images is typically anchored to familiar forms of emotional investment. We know approximately how much will be asked from us, and the likely ways in which we will make our customary payments (of fear, laughter, sentiment). But Sontag's claim that photographs tend to subtract feeling from experience is worth thinking about. If it is true that spectator involvement in film narrative almost always lives off a current of emotion, and perishes in its absence, the subtraction of one kind of experience-derived feeling must be accompanied by the creation of other modes of feeling. (And where would these surrogate emotions come from, if not from experience?)

Perhaps the rhythm of film reality is the alternation of feelings being "subtracted" from pictures, then "added" back to them in a different grouping. As a camera closes in on the action of a scene, for example, the effect is generally to intensify concentration, to increase the emotional weight of individual words, expressions, points of realization. When the camera reverses direction or reestablishes distance in a long shot, there is as a rule a felt subtraction of urgency. We are permitted, however briefly, to exchange the accelerated perceptual involvement born of tightening identification or thrilling trespass for a more abstract, arguably freer activity of contemplation. Contemplation widens the field of vision, restores a sense of larger context, and releases the spectator from the moment-to-moment push of keyed-up, hyperbolized details. This standing back from the artificial environment of drama is the place where narrative can give way to the separate authority of images. The intervals in which long shots predominate achieve their truth claims by a cleansing return to less regimented perception, reminding us of the "multitudinous" dimension of appearances, all that is not confined to the exigencies of protagonist viewpoint and dramatic spectacle.

Long shots are, of course, *isolated* views of a setting in the same way that close-ups are. Any sense of internal harmony in a photograph is due to an arrangement of scenery in which the isolated prospect's relation to its surroundings is deformed. And yet the crossing-over from a landscape in which the camera is an anxious magnifying glass, prying out secrets from "vulnerable" faces and "exposed" actions, to a landscape where appearances regain the natural mystery of simply "being there," highlights meaningful differences in representation. The camera is as adept at robbing things of secrets as it is at giving secrets back to them. It ravages surfaces until it seems they cry out for protection or a mantle of darkness. And it honors surfaces by often appearing not to ask anything of them, rendering them with a strength of detachment that the human eye is seldom equal to.

A number of film scenes involving humiliation of suddenly unshielded characters will illustrate more concretely my sense of how the camera continually crosses and re-crosses the line between a brutalizing proximity and a restorative distance. Clearly this tension depends on far more than mere camera placement. Sometimes a long shot can seem to tear away every outward support that a character pins his faith on. At the most basic level, distance can convey utter abandonment, placing characters even beyond the spectator's reach. Our desire to join with a figure onscreen as an invisible, hovering partner in grief can be defeated by the swift, cold insertion of a spatial gap, a remoteness we are powerless to lessen. A camera may also, at any point and from any distance, become a collaborator in torture, adopting the perspective of one who is justified in being merciless, or caging a too exposed victim—with no notion of what might be a permissible limit for drinking in details. A close view, conversely, can seem not to violate or bear down on a character at all, but to reveal qualities (to the beholder's protective gaze) that no one in the world of the film is privy to, or can be made to see with the requisite intimacy of understanding. (I think immediately of Falconetti's face in Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc*.) Proximity and distance then, in the humiliation scenes I am examining, will be approached as psychic conditions, staged by the camera in strikingly diverse ways.

The Best Years of Our Lives (William Wyler, 1946), a film André Bazin extolled for its "democratic" use of deep focus, contains a scene in which Homer Parrish, a sailor whose hands have been amputated as a result of a war injury, invites his girl friend, Wilma, to watch him prepare for bed. Homer's motive, unambiguously specified, is to show Wilma how grotesque and helpless he appears once he removes his prosthetic hooks. Having seen him so pitiably reduced, Wilma must, in his view, share his realization that they have no future together as a couple. His wholly honorable purpose is to frighten her with the magnitude of the emotional adjustment she would have to make to his irrevocably diminished person. Once she has been obliged to look at his shortened limbs at close range, in full light, her protective sympathy will not be enough to keep her from turning

away from him. Her devotion as a friend, her unfailingly good intentions, her memory-suffused attachment to his prewar condition, are not of themselves an adequate basis for a marriage. He undresses himself, hardly daring to consult her eyes, in which something as final as a death sentence on her romantic feeling for him will, in all likelihood, be reflected.

What further complicates this episode of valorous self-shaming is the spectator's knowledge that Harold Russell, the actor playing Homer, is also an amputee, bearing an authentic physical loss from his own experience in the Second World War. If Homer, then, suffers genuine humiliation in Wilma's (and the camera's) sight, we cannot take refuge in the assumption that Harold Russell is not personally at risk in what he displays to us. The scene's potential pathos is enormously enhanced by our awareness that within the framework of fiction we are taking part in a real unmasking. If the camera does not find a means to validate Homer that is distinct from the contrivances of melodrama, if his wounds, in other words, fail to secure a significance beyond their power to elicit our momentary tears, then a second level of shaming (this one unintentional) emerges. At the same time, the inescapability of Russell's real disfigurement, in this episode and throughout the film, limits the narrative's capacity to add a demanding internal burden to the damage the veteran wears outwardly. This disquietingly literal victim can be shown (as a character) contending with his family's and friends' awkwardness and discomfort as they painfully adapt to his new appearance and altered prospects, since scenes of this kind stress other people's attitudes and misguided behavior as the major source of his problems. But the strength of his own resolve to make a meaningful life for himself, at whatever cost, must never be seriously in doubt. Otherwise, fiction would seem to be conspiring sadistically against the future hopes of one who has suffered a devastating loss in wartime service.

The hyperreality of the images of Homer's hooks automatically confers an exemplary status on this character and his fate. He can hardly escape the task of representing the countless other maimed veterans who are similarly engaged in finding their way back into the now alien weave of family and community. The film aspires to be perfectly convincing in its depiction of Homer's dilemma, while offering every assurance that the long ordeal of homecoming will ultimately give "lost" soldiers the fulfillment they seek.

The humiliation scene, therefore, must have precisely and unequivocally the opposite effect from that which Homer anticipates. Neither Wilma nor the camera can be permitted to join for an instant in Homer's plan to punishingly expose himself. A visual climate needs to be established that will reveal Homer's "deformities," first, as wholly amenable to dispassionate rational inquiry, and second, as allowing an immediate acknowledgement of unconditional love. All the suspect psychic appetites in the spectator—which might lead him (in other contexts) to savor the lurid evidence of grotesque or aberrant appearance, or to gather at fires or collisions in the irrational grip of a desire to see strangers suffering—must be held in check if Homer is to be safe in his presence. Wilma's manner of watching Homer as he removes his shirt and hooks—calm, unsurprised, ready to intervene when he requires assistance, unwavering in her preparedness to love whatever she sees (because what she sees is Homer)—is presented as synonymous with the camera's own method of absorbing what shame uncovers. The audience is tutored by her healing gaze; there is, in fact, a palpable pressure to emulate this gaze and thus become worthy of such chaste feelings ourselves.

Still, there are peculiarities in the staging of the episode. As she follows Homer upstairs to his bedroom, Wilma moves with the measured solemnity of a priestess in a formalized rite. It is as though the action she is about to witness is somehow already completed and possessed by foreknowledge. She enters this ritual space with no hint of trepidation. William Wyler is a specialist in the high drama of minute shifts of expression in close-up. Perhaps his most famous scene is Herbert Marshall's death by heart attack in *The Little Foxes*, which we see reflected in the terrifyingly still, clenched face of his implacable wife (Bette Davis). As he staggers behind her, trying to climb the stairs to reach his medicine, she stares forward, willing his collapse and destruction, yet visibly stunned by the totality of her surrender to evil. In its agonizing, held-breath duration, this close-up gives us the impression we are attending to something unspeakable which is nonetheless rooted in impulses that are not foreign to us. Our share in the process is to resist the lure of Davis's beckoning coldness, to try to simplify our response from an involuntary partial complicity to a more appropriate revulsion.

The few close-ups of Wilma in the *Best Years of Our Lives*' bedroom scene carry no comparable sense of difficult feelings in transition. Any capitulation to doubt on her part might break Homer further, might push him more dangerously out in the open, where the threat of unregulated perception of his wounds would allow shame a real point of entry. Wyler, a master of humiliation scenes throughout his career, is attempt-

ing here to design an anti-humiliation scene, where the dreaded self-exposure miscarries, and every suggestion of abasement is met and dissolved by love.

Lurking about the edges of this dramatic situation is the inadmissible pleasure, so often exploited in other movie narratives, of watching nasty or ignorant strength prey upon a too naked weakness. The removal of a victim's last line of defense, which confirms his (and possibly our) worst fear of lying helpless in an attack, is part of the general atmosphere of war which Wyler must consistently oppose in this film. Homer's security within his bedroom must be absolutely walled-off from the perils of combat. The remedy for war's ghastly surprises and unending eruptions of chance misfortune is a realm in which nothing whatever is left to chance. No discordant gesture, word, or look will leap out at us during Homer's disrobing, so that our perspective on the event will not be even lightly menaced by uncertainty. Voices throughout are as quietly contained as Wilma's perfectly steady, unflinching concentration. And although Homer is implicitly asking Wilma whether she will be able to regard him, unpityingly, as an acceptable sexual partner, there seems to be no way that the unpredictable force of sexual tension can be brought into play for so much as an instant. Wilma, like all of the good women associated with veterans in *Best Years*, enfolds her emotionally fragile charge in a selfless embrace of mother love. Before kissing him goodnight, she radiantly tucks him in, as though there could be no deeper joy. Visible passion, like visible doubt, might increase the likelihood of Homer's humiliation by the camera. Excess of every sort must be purged from view so that the camera's skill at entrapping objects in the wrong kind of light cannot be exercised.

The impression of the camera's reverence for what it sees may depend in general (as it does here) on a restriction of the mobility of perspectives, especially volatile perspectives that switch, without warning, from one set of feelings to another. Wyler's respectful standing-back from a dramatic situation through a restrained visual treatment evokes the idea of a potentially comprehensible world beyond the distorting optics of individual moods (ever-fluctuating, extravagant). But this contemplative view is purchased at the expense of everything that resists containment, that veers away from the settled state. Homer's self-exposure to Wilma takes place in a climate that is wholly amenable to patient, rational inquiry. The bedroom's seeming rightness as a field for true vision emerges only after all that is dangerous, forbidden, or extreme is unobtrusively disposed of as "unnatural." If we were to break the spell by asserting our immoderate difference from Wilma (say, our greater capacity for shock or discomfort or nervous laughter), we would challenge the authority of the camera to specify what is really there, and take on the humiliation that Homer is spared (visually, dramatically) as our own. In its near-unearthly calm, the scene *rationally* asks us whether our freedom to make such a counter-statement is worth anything.

In Roman Polanski's *The Tenant* (1976), an apparently tiny humiliation episode expands to gigantic dimensions without the first-time viewer being allowed to see (or in any direct fashion, know) how this is happening. The purpose of the scene is secretly to generate a discomfort out of all proportion to the mildly embarrassing "facts" of the situation, so that we can't identify a specific worry or source of fear and secure a familiar relation to it. Trelkovsky (played by Polanski) wakes up the morning after a housewarming party that he has hosted for a group of disagreeable fellow-office workers in his newly acquired Paris apartment and discovers that the floor of his bedroom is strewn with bits of spilled food. We next see him carrying two large bags and a plastic pail of collected party waste down the main staircase of his building and encountering his landlord, who wants to "know the meaning" of the previous night's celebration, whose noise level had interfered with his sleep. After demanding that the heavily encumbered Trelkovsky offer an immediate explanation for his lack of consideration, the landlord (Mr. Zy) makes a great show of not listening to it, consulting his watch and frowning as Trelkovsky, staggering under his load, tries to assure him of his good intentions, his reasonableness, and his resolve to be a model of caution in the future. Barely placated, Zy turns away to begin a slow descent of the stairs, telling Trelkovsky that he had been strongly tempted to "take steps" to cancel his lease for this first breach of faith. One of Trelkovsky's bags has been on the point of leaking garbage throughout this exchange. The words that the two men speak, in fact, register far less strongly than the widening wet stain on the almost dropped, filled-to-bursting paper bag. Yet, Trelkovsky's painfully conspicuous predicament is one to which Zy remains steadfastly oblivious.

When the landlord's departing form is separated from Trelkovsky by a full flight of stairs, a piece of fruit escapes from the finally ruptured sack, audibly hitting the step that Zy has just passed. Fortunately, he

Polanski as Trelkovsky, the haunted tenant

fails to notice the fruit and the possible stain it has made on his venerable, immaculate, and expensive-looking carpeting. No sooner has he disappeared, however, than this advance piece of offensive matter is followed by many others, each of them slipping uncontrollably through a soggy rent so large and lengthening that Trelkovsky cannot cover it or stem the flow. Each fresh chunk released onto the carpet during Trelkovsky's ignominious retreat from the building has the same aggressive tactility. Everything is moist and clammy—unappetizing to look at, demeaning to scoop up, almost certain to leave a stain or accusing residue.

The dramatic question arising at this point in the scene is naturally: Will he be able to clean up his mess before he is found out? There is also a competing pressure at work in the scene to have him flee the evidence of his transgression and face the unpleasant consequences later. What one is given no time or prompting to expect is that Trelkovsky's garbage problem will be magically taken care of, and we share his astonishment as he returns to the staircase, clearly within moments of ridding himself of the bags, and beholds a carpet entirely free of his waste. The stairs stretch out, before his and our gaze, empty and spotless. As we begin to search Trelkovsky's expression for a possible clue as to what is going on and how to interpret it, the scene abruptly ends with the mysterious cleansing of one source of anxiety functioning as the very thing which produces a second level of anxiety. The carpet would seem to have repressed its own befouling, so that its final neatness is visually superimposed on a "dirt" that is still there somehow, waiting for a chance to resurface.

The basic situation in this strange episode resembles a silent comedy routine. But Polanski breaks the frame of the comic scene by forcing it to assimilate something that went before, something that is too extreme in its sensory claims on us to lie still and let familiar jokes play over it. At the beginning of the scene, Trelkovsky accidentally steps on a bit of wet, discolored vegetable matter as he gets out of bed. As Trelkovsky peels the scrap of food from the sole of his foot and wipes his soiled fingertips on his pajama trousers, we feel a sympathetic memory shudder of unsavory, leech-like stickiness on our own momentarily "exposed" skin. The queasiness aroused by this need to rid oneself of taint *immediately* while at the same time holding onto it (moving the dirt to another part of one's person) is compounded in the stairway scene, which we jump into just as Trelkovsky completes his wiping motion. His hands are now clutching a great deal more of the slippery remains of his dinner party. Because we have already been made to handle one piece of garbage with him, all subsequent appearances of discharge from the soggy bag are overdetermined in their effect.

Trelkovsky's encounter with his unyielding land-

lord is a drama of appeasement played out with all the victim's unsayable retorts to ill-treatment gathered in his arms. The bulging garbage bags threatening to give way correspond exactly to Trelkovsky's filled-to-bursting inner state. Trelkovsky's strained meekness as his unlistened-to apology stretches out to ever more cumbersome and pointless length is a barely controlled enactment of composure. He strives to dissociate himself from his seething resentment at having to coddle a tyrant, but the tilting bag with its widening stain overrides the willed blandness of face and voice.

Our identification prior to this stage of the film's narrative has been with the well-mannered Trelkovsky, more or less by default. Thus far he has been nearly the sole alternative to a crude, unappealingly loud, and narrow-minded aggression that is established as the mechanical norm of human exchanges. Trelkovsky has attained a frail but meaningful edge of superiority in the majority of his interactions by being civil and courteous, and by refusing, sometimes slyly, the repeatedly offered bait of rudeness. But too much submissiveness brings about a strong desire for at least an occasional escape of unfairly bottled-up instincts. Spectators typically ally themselves with long-suffering, passive protagonists in the expectation (and hope) that they will eventually be pushed to their breaking point and earn a just, violent reprieve from "goodness." In *The Tenant*, all the unharnessed retribution will turn out to be self-directed, as Trelkovsky is slowly revealed to the viewer as someone lost, unreclaimably, in madness. His apparently justified paranoia at the ghastly belligerence and ceaseless provocations of those with whom he has social dealings has been the deceptive basis of our initial participation in his experience. Without warning, his perspective becomes radically untrustworthy, and the spectator has no choice but to repudiate the earlier friendly attachment. Yet the emotional threats that Trelkovsky faces are so vivid and suffocatingly immediate that it is almost impossible not to keep crossing back over the line into unwanted merger with his way of seeing things. Neither the certainty that he is frighteningly deranged nor the desire to keep one's distance from his steadily more repellent and self-destructive behavior is an adequate safeguard against renewed identification with him.

In the stairway scene, the camera appears to alternate between an "open," objective view of what is taking place and a natural, tightening identification with Trelkovsky as he contends with the landlord and then, in isolation, with the dripping garbage. Underlying these legible, convention-defined camera strategies is a covert attempt to transfer ownership of the visual field to the unforgiving Zy by, in effect, internalizing his stare and the fathomless depth of its potential condemnation. While the landlord is still physically there, one is led to wonder why he does not register the splitting garbage bag as a presence. It is possible for us to hold such a question in combination with a desire that the unheeded threat may erupt on him, an outcome that would "serve him right." But as I have already noted, the secret quarry of Polanski's camera here (and essential preparation for what follows) is still another recognition—that Trelkovsky's being is somehow expressed or contained by the bags he holds. The objects are a more direct and emphatic assertion of his state of mind than his spare, politely withholding manner. When the first and only intact piece of fruit slips free of the bag and rolls over the landing to *almost* strike Zy, it is an amusing instance of the garbage bag's capacity to act as Trelkovsky's surrogate in mild aggression. And because the intended offense doesn't reach its destination, it mutely reverts to Trelkovsky (as something not gotten rid of, which must be covered up). He seems characteristically to have launched an ineffectual protest. The final status of this teasingly defiant advance-scout object is that of an act which escaped detection, an innocently insulting gesture which can be safely returned "inside" Trelkovsky. This momentary escape from the landlord's stare is the means by which the staircase is redefined visually in terms of that stare. We are reminded that everything in the building comes under his surveillance, and that nothing shameful or discrediting will escape it for very long. And within this realm of vigilant scrutiny, Trelkovsky's insides begin to give way, leaving excremental deposits (or bad thoughts that cannot be kept in place) too numerous, too adhesively stuck for him ever to regain control of. It is as though his inner life has migrated to the carpet, objectified as a repeating spasm of foulness, and in this more solid, credible form seeks to expose its former possessor by living nakedly in the other's gaze.

The camera does not soften Trelkovsky's descent into the inanimate, nor does it protect him from the consequences of this breakdown of boundaries. What the image "knows" as it amplifies the significance of this mess is what Trelkovsky's landlord would know, as though the camera had turned informant rather than share the tenant's secret. As the sprinkling of Trelkovsky's innards threatens to become a downpour, the task of retrieval and concealment becomes so repellently vast that the viewer self-protectively breaks contact with the suddenly too infectious vic-

tim. Almost literally, we wash our hands of him. The simplest way to effect this break is to occupy the camera-as-landlord perspective that has been set up in anticipation of our arrival.

Thus we begin by claiming the mess as our own through our prickly identification with Trelkovsky and end by shifting our loyalty to the carpet, whose fastidiousness, like ours, has been excessively violated. Trelkovsky teeters under his ugly load on the stairs, more isolated and shrunken than ever by the double draining of the bag-as-self and the viewer's sympathy. When Trelkovsky returns to the stairway after ridding himself of the bags it is as someone who, oddly and inscrutably, merits punishment for a murky crime. Trelkovsky is humiliated by thoughts which have turned visible and tactile, challenging the notion that the mind's furtive workings are inaccessible to the camera's gaze. As the tenant returns to the shameful trail he has left and fails to find it, we share his anxious bewilderment at its vanishing.

The spectator recovers a close to full involvement with Trelkovsky's point of view at the moment the camera asserts the absence of any trace of an experience that had seemed, throughout its unfolding, inescapably *material*. Instead of relief that the apparatus of humiliation has been eliminated with a Cat-in-the-Hat thoroughness, Polanski posits a threat of excessive cleanliness dwelling on the reverse side of excessive soiling. It is as though our own prior wish that the foulness go away has been fulfilled at the cost of all perceptual stability. A small child first watches as his excrement swirls down the toilet hole, then is filled with fear at its disappearance. "I must have it back again. It is part of me. Without it I am less, maybe nothing. Mother/'me' might wash away just as easily. Where did 'I'/it go, in separating from the rest of me?" Trelkovsky is left suspended with his unanswerable thoughts, which may themselves be the place where his filth (and ours as well) is hiding. The camera restores the clean carpet to us in the form of a surface to which nothing adheres. Where, if not here, is Trelkovsky to go looking for himself? The meager personal life has retreated to the point where it can leave no marks upon the world. Even Trelkovsky's shame does not belong to him.

The last form of humiliation scene to be considered is perhaps the most familiar from our dream life. A large audience or crowd is made an essential component of the process. The camera can, of course, assume the outlook of a lynch mob when there are only one or two characters present, and rob any action of its claims to privacy. Paradoxically, the necessity of private space for guarding all that is most vulnerable and inexpressible in the human is nowhere more powerfully realized in film than in scenes where crowds anonymously enclose or angrily assail the individual. One of the earliest and most enduring conventions of movie narrative is the idea of waiting for a crowd to part like a curtain so that a single point of interest will be disclosed at the heart of it. In general, the meaning of crowds in film images is something that stands, however inattentively, against the personal. The personal continually requires visual rescue from the mass, or needs to become its sympathetic center of focus if it is not to be dangerously diluted.

The young boy and his father with their backs to us who dissolve into the throng filling the city street in the final shot of *Bicycle Thieves* (Vittorio De Sica, 1948) do not, as might seem to be the case, become one with it. The shot enjoins us to challenge the film's authority to take this intensely particularized pair away from us. The camera, in the act of relinquishing them to a multitude that would have no reason to single them out or value the significance of what they have been through together, generates a need in us to turn them around in memory so that they continue to face us. If the spectator manages to hold onto them against the pull of the crowd, and brings to a kind of memory-stasis the emotions illuminated in their last actions (thereby protecting them from the further humiliation of oblivion: tragedy too shapeless and unmarked to count for anything), then they are not lost. But De Sica would not have us leave the crowd out of account. The mass, he wishes us to understand, is a hidden reflector of the things we have learned to honor in our experience of an ordinary father and son. Nonetheless, our essential empathic act is protesting the disappearance of the two whom we know. If we feel no pressure to retrieve their separateness and keep the precise form of their private experience intact, then what leads us to imagine (or think ourselves answerable for) the fate of the mass?

A brilliantly bizarre scene in the melodrama *Humoresque* (Jean Negulesco, 1946) involves the humiliation of a secondary character (Gina, played by Joan Chandler) while she sits concealed in a large concert audience listening to her beloved (John Garfield) play the violin. Gina gradually becomes aware not only that he is addressing his impassioned musical performance to another woman (Joan Crawford), who sits high above her in an opera box, but also that the current of music is received so com-

John Garfield and Joan Crawford
in *Humoresque*

pletely by this majestic rival that she is telepathically making love to him. It is not merely the case then of a character discovering, while trapped in the heedless company of others, that someone else has secured the love that she hoped for. The music issuing from Garfield's violin is a secret conduit for actual caresses and whispered intimacies, and it is driving its elected object to an exquisite rapture, framed in mammoth, shimmering close-ups. Gina finds herself a frozen witness to a sex scene as surely as if she had inadvertently opened the door of an occupied bedroom. She is initially caught in the net of Garfield's autocratic harmonies, whose spirit she is so attuned to that she knows the music utterly excludes her. She alone, in this vast audience, can find no point of entry to the performance. Gina is then caught in a chain of looks from which she cannot free herself: an ever more intense and close-up communication between Crawford and Garfield's entranced playing, in which the romantic stakes are raised higher and higher. The audience's blindness to this exchange, and the lovers' innocent unmindfulness of everything but their own happiness, exacerbate the force and pain of Gina's isolated seeing. Eventually, as the musically deified couple move toward some transcendent climax, the completely dissolved, disposable witness (whose suffering, even for the spectator, matters far less than the couple's unearthly mingling) flees the concert hall. But her humiliation seems widened and deepened by her flight. Not only does Garfield's music pursue her into the night like an avenging Fury, but she is also obliged to pass, in a heavy rain, poster after poster of Garfield, violin regally in hand, stretching endlessly across the front of the hall.

In the final public humiliation scene from Josef von Sternberg's *The Blue Angel* (1930), Professor Immanuel Rath (Emil Jannings) has returned to the town where he once held a relatively distinguished position as teacher to perform as a clown in a cabaret act for the entertainment of his appalled former colleagues, his once oppressed, now vengeful former students, and a horde of others who have caught a premonitory whiff of blood in the air. As Rath submits to having a knife plunged into his hat to demonstrate his empty-headedness and to having eggs broken upon his head—to roars of murderous laughter—he

becomes aware that the woman for whom he sacrificed his position and self-respect is embracing a new lover in the wings. Urged by the magician who has organized the performance to crow like a rooster in response to the egg-breaking, Rath disappears into a terrifyingly demented impersonation of a rooster, making shrill bird-like noises with the abandonment of one who has shredded his last few ties with the human realm.

The magic act is designed to show Rath blankly assenting to torture that the assembled audience can have faith in as legitimate and unstaged. The once stern and pedantic language teacher has been poured, as in a conjuring trick, from one rigid container (the costume of authority) into another (a benumbed clown's head, with a disease-fattened nose and a right eye ferociously slit by a greasepaint razor scar). And if the crowd is not to grow sated and weary with the static spectacle—as in the restlessness following a decapitation: what *more* is there to see?—the magician must contrive an even narrower container for his pathetic slave to occupy. The relief Rath finds in his demonic crowing comes from the fact that the sounds he makes at last seem to give full expression to whatever is left inside him. The crowing becomes a command which silences and renders impossible the disciplinary force of the social world. And the film's sound track, in its creaking, "dawn of talkies" antiquity, seems to awaken to this new command as it has to no other. The bird shriek rises above the foggy ambience of the crowd's reaction and swiftly obliterates it altogether. Moreover, after Rath's eruption there are no more views of the theater audience, as though his cries had dissolved not only its power over him but also its very existence. Seldom if ever has castration been so exultantly seized as an answer to prayer. The public skewering of his barely surviving manhood frees Rath, ironically, of the burdens of servility. His crowing may prevail over the crowd's insupportable derision by becoming one with it, as in the schizophrenic fantasy of being joined to a great throng even when alone, and taking one's freedom to move and launch attacks from the collective noise pressing up from within. In Elias Canetti's metaphor, the borrowed strength of countless neighboring voices is like the thrill of slipping out of the house undetected to join a gathering mob in the darkened streets, leaving one's slave mentality and its fears "piled in the cellar."[2]

Prior to Rath's entrance as the clown in the magic act, we see him hiding behind glistening gauze curtains which clearly afford inadequate protection from the audience's hungry scanning of the stage. At various points in his subsequent ordeal, he vaguely retreats to the white-curtain screen in the hope that it might furnish an escape route, and more than once nearly wraps himself up in it. It is reasonable to think of this curtain as a surrogate movie screen, and Rath—as stranded as Buster Keaton before the dreamed movie screen in *Sherlock, Jr.*—appealing to the camera, which has layed bare all its devices for negative exposure, to spare him the last extremities of indignity. Arguably to an even greater extent than Polanski in *The Tenant*, von Sternberg is, throughout *The Blue Angel*, an accomplice in persecution. He refuses to explore the downfall of this miserably isolated, pas-

The Blue Angel: Emil Jannings as the tormented Professor Rath

sion-blinded martinet of a schoolteacher from the inside, and does not readily regard his final condition as worthy of tragic sympathy. Against the apparent logic of the story, von Sternberg seems to collude with the glitteringly amoral conduct of the temptress figure, Lola-Lola (Marlene Dietrich). Her harsh playfulness and coolly self-absorbed survivor tenacity so intensely engage him that they become the film's real, if sometimes covert, center of value.

It would be wrong, however, to claim that the camera finds common cause with the jeering audience and Lola in the humiliation scene. Rath's harrowing clown face is so eloquently expressive that it attains unchallengeable image authority. Yet there is a sense that the camera does not wish to save him or shield him from any moment of what he is forced to endure. It does not seek out his privacy or bracket off a visual space in which he can deliver himself to us in different terms than his hideous exhibition to the crowd allows. His clown make-up, in its mask-like fixity, stands between us and Rath, issuing, to be sure, an anguished bulletin from the dark interior, but not in a personalized form. We could not begin to answer the question of what possesses Rath to agree to this stage appearance when the outcome is so certain. Rath's relation with himself in the concluding phases of his descent matters much less to von Sternberg than his arrival at some awesome absolute of degradation, where the human becomes so unknowable, so sabotaged in its will to privacy that it has to erupt as something else. The camera embraces completely Rath's emergence as the mad, screeching bird, granting at last the acknowledgment it has withheld for as long as he resisted, with any show of self-awareness, his fate.

The reverse of this depersonalizing effect is achieved in *Mr. and Mrs. Bridge* (James Ivory, 1990). Douglas Bridge (Robert Sean Leonard) stands with a hundred or more young men in a municipal auditorium to receive, like them, his Eagle Scout badge. The awarding ceremony has been arranged to include a tribute to the Eagle Scouts' mothers, without whose "help, love, and encouragement" the coveted highest rank in Scouting could not have been achieved. The mothers, each wearing an honorary red rose pinned to her breast, are proudly seated beside their sons, who stand with military formality while a senior Scout official declares that the moment has come for the Eagle-elects to say, "... each in the way *she* likes best, 'Thank you, mother.'" Douglas's mother (Joanne Woodward) sits expectantly as the assembled sons turn on cue to bend and kiss their mothers, while whispering assurances of gratitude and devotion. She suddenly realizes, with heart-shrivelling impact, that her son alone has remained standing and facing forward. Though the thank-you's take but a few seconds to complete, she appears to be cast into an eternity of exposure, as one publicly shunned by a child who cannot perform a simple gesture of filial respect.

At the same time, we see Douglas's acute discomfort at finding himself immobilized. It is not that he is deliberately punishing her in this dreadful fashion. He is, in the language of Scouting, unprepared, having no history of emotional ease with her to draw upon. The prospect of initiating physical contact with her is more alarming to him than the alternative danger of judgment by the assembled onlookers. He trembles with shock at the enormity of his affront, then goes rigid with the effort to put it out of mind. He executes an about-face with the other Scouts, and is greeted with everyone's applause, including his mother's. He finally joins the entire audience in singing "America the Beautiful," carefully avoiding looking at his mother or anything else as he tries not to let any part of what he is feeling touch him.

India Bridge, for her part, is immolated on the altar of propriety. She has dedicated her entire married life to maintaining appearances and good manners, without a single significant deviation from the prescribed norms of her privileged class. She is always on the verge of discovering that she doesn't believe in the value of any of the forms she fearfully follows. It is not only then her accomplishments as a mother, which she has seldom dared to dwell on, that are nullified at the Eagle Scout ceremony, but her whole life as a purely appearance-defined being. She sits trapped in the midst of row after row of nicely regimented good citizens in the making and has no choice but to compose herself and find the strength to sing "America the Beautiful" along with them. No soldier about to enter combat has more inner disturbance to subdue than India Bridge as she tries to locate her breath, remember the words to the song, and obliterate consciousness, like her son, in the "drowning pool" of this communal act. Her body reverts, awkwardly, to her prepared script for the evening, and she stands exactly as she would if she had every reason to be swelling with maternal pride.

At some distance from India sits her husband, Walter (Paul Newman), who witnesses her suffering with discomfort and a slow-footed, partial awareness of its magnitude. What he cannot grasp from his viewing distance is that Douglas's stiffness and inability to give his mother normal expressions of affection are modelled closely on his own behavior toward her.

Later in the evening he will try to make it up to her in their bedroom, while she gazes in despair at her rose. His version of consolation is, not surprisingly, sexual, the only sort of physical contact he can allow himself, and, as it happens, the kind of attention that means the least to her.

There is nothing cold in Ivory's quality of detachment from this "minor" incident, and there are no obstacles to a spectator's desire for the fullest possible seeing of what's there. The characters' wounds are amply rendered, but the camera gains its power of discernment in part by seeming to have no specific emotional demands to make on us. We are entrusted to complete the spectacle for ourselves by deciding where, and with what degree of intensity, to place the emphasis. The camera's eye, on this occasion, is not synonymous with the crowd's, nor is it that of a greedy spy, devouring whatever better-left-private scraps are set before it. The sad plight of these characters is accepted with the composure that may be the camera's best equivalent of love. The scale of the action is resolutely, and appropriately, modest. Any visual declaration that we are in the presence of a big scene would be ruinous to the overall effect, which depends on a scrupulous avoidance of virtuosity in style.

Significance is reserved for the implications of mutually incomprehensible wrongdoing. How *easily* this particular son's offense might have been avoided, and yet the Bridges' habitual practice of communication through numbness (where distance is as indispensable as a heartbeat) made it unthinkable for Douglas to act otherwise. He fully intends to do what is expected of him, but a bewildering tightness overtakes him, and he misses the moment when he might save his mother from an all-encompassing shame. In the smallness of the gap between an almost sufficient intention and a lost deed, we are meant to see (hardly for the first time) how things become what they already are, in the stark intervals of human inadequacy. The scene is composed entirely of things being withheld, under terrific strain; and yet every feeling, failing to find its proper outlet, stays miraculously within reach of the camera.

André Bazin's noble dream of cinema was of a window ("the widest possible") opening onto the world. The greatest justification of film, in his view, is its capacity to give the world, which is already ours, back to us in its openness, beauty, and continually forgotten presentness. Bazin's redemptive vision rests on a belief that the camera's natural tendency is to honor those appearances that are exposed to it. If film artists trust the sufficiency of things-as-they-are and the camera's gift for making an accurate, truthful record, cinema will be a place of momentous discovery and ongoing revelation rather than literature's hard-up neighbor. The requirements of narrative, of course, offer continual temptations to forget cinema's privilege of contemplating images for their own sake, as self-contained entities. As Wim Wenders notes in "Impossible Stories," filmed images "don't necessarily lead to anything else." Narrative inescapably involves "forcing the images in some way."

> Sometimes this manipulation becomes narrative art, but not necessarily. Often enough, the result is only abused pictures.
>
> I dislike the manipulation that's necessary to press all the images of a film into one story; it's very harmful for the images because it tends to drain them of their "life." In the relationship between story and image, I see the story as a kind of vampire trying to suck all the blood from an image. Images are acutely sensitive; like snails they shrink back when you touch their horns. They don't have it in them to be carthorses: carrying and transporting messages or significance or intention or a moral. But that's precisely what a story wants from them.[3]

The phrase "abused pictures" is extremely suggestive, but it is a provocation as well. Wenders clearly shares Bazin's reverence for images in their "unfallen" state, ascribing to them, without evident strain, the innocence and tender delicacy of uncorrupted souls. Images, in this "story," easily fall prey to manipulative violence of all sorts—from the indiscriminate acquisitiveness of a camera reduced to pure mechanism, to the enslaving demands of a plot, which in its speed and falsity allows no room for genuine contemplation. For Bazin and Wenders, the moving picture camera was created for "holy" interventions in reality, preserving the truth of moments by being alive to the multitude of large and small relations inscribed there. The camera's high mission is to be a god of love, unreservedly embracing reality in all of its rushing, adamant particularity. Within the stargate of the emergent visible, everything attains an equal worthiness to be looked at, without the clothing of story or moral, and will be judged good insofar as images can *reveal* and make restitution. As the cam-

era, in Eric Rohmer's words, "keeps tightening its hold on reality,"[4] its "natural" impetus is to draw us nearer to what it exposes to light. But does image captivity not also lead, with equal naturalness, to repudiation, to a diminished responsiveness to both the original photographic subject and its continually depreciated representations? Kafka is reported to have once challenged the description of the camera apparatus as a mechanical "Know thyself." He countered with the phrase "Mistake thyself," arguing that the camera "obscures the hidden life which glimmers through the outlines of things like a play of light and shade."[5]

Being open to the light of film is ordinarily understood to mean a comfortable insulation in glamour. Outside commercial cinema's repertoire of conventionalized safe reflections (which entice without wounding, but also without deepening one's view) lie the extremes of what camera images can powerfully avow: on the one hand, an increased humility about our common status as visual objects, and the freedom that comes from finding ourselves mysteriously yoked to everything we see; on the other hand, a humiliation which strips its object of privacy, forcing it into a space where no solidarity or shelter is available. Perhaps the filmed humiliation scenes that take us closest to a saving awareness not drowned in helpless identification or shame are those where our aroused compassion, denied a single resting place (as in *Mr. and Mrs. Bridge*), somehow overspreads the whole situation. Our desire that someone be made accountable for what we have been put through is properly thwarted until we acknowledge our secret kinship with the camera's cruelty and freely elect ourselves for the burden of knowledge and answerability.

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Notes

1. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), p. 168.
2. Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stenkorf (New York: Penguin, 1987), p. 376.
3. Wim Wenders, "Impossible Stories," in *The Logic of Images: Essays and Conversations*, trans. Michael Hoffman (Boston: Faber & Faber, 1991), p. 53.
4. Christopher Williams, ed., *Realism and the Cinema: A Reader* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 253.
5. Gustav Janovich, *Conversations with Kafka*, quoted in Sontag, p. 206.

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A Brief History of Time: Stephen Hawking

Shawn Rosenheim

Extraterrestrial

Science Fictions in *A Brief History of Time* and *The Incredible Shrinking Man*

In directing *A Brief History of Time*, Errol Morris faced a problem intrinsic to a certain form of documentary film-making: How to narrate pure science? Though Stephen Hawking's book was intended for laymen, its graphs and equations, turgid prose, and lack of plot meant that shooting a straight version was impossible.[1] This last condition was especially problematic, for despite the obvious potential for special effects, the progress of the universe from Big Bang to Big Crunch makes for arid, inhuman storytelling; indeed, in its vastness and contingency, such a chronicle is not, properly speaking, a story at all. To solve this problem, Morris chose to design an overdetermined world built on occult metaphoric connections between Stephen Hawking's cosmologies and his life. Though the cinematic materials used in *A Brief History* are typical of documentaries—illustrative scientific graphics, interview clips, and voice-over narration—and though Hawking's narration is condensed almost wholly from his own writings, the film is more science fiction than science, an oneiric essay on luck, chance, and fate that allows Morris to cast Stephen Hawking as "the man of the future."[2]

According to Morris, "the hardest part of making *A Brief History* was to construct a narrative around Stephen Hawking."[3] Given Hawking's almost total immobility (Morris calls him "the ultimate non-talking talking head"), "constructing a narrative" literally

describes the film-maker's task; Hawking has said that Morris manipulated and filmed him as if he were a sofa. In part, Morris structured *A Brief History* according to cosmological principles; the film's frame of reference continually expands from Hawking's birth until he is struck by amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (A.L.S.), at which time its horizon and focus contract, as in the recollapse of the universe prior to the Big Crunch. But Morris also recognized that Hawking's life belongs to science fiction, in the sense of both the literary genre and the myths of science that circulate through mass culture. *A Brief History* acknowledges this fact in a number of ways, as in the inclusion of an excerpt from Disney's *The Black Hole*, in which Martin Landau and Tony Perkins debate the wisdom of entering the title object. But far more profoundly, *A Brief History of Time* is indebted to Jack Arnold's *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1957); so indebted, in fact, that *A Brief History* covertly shapes its version of Hawking's life and work in rough accord with the narrative logic and emotional trajectory of that earlier film.[4] Obliquely, Hawking's fate in *A Brief History* comes to prefigure the future of the race, as the place of the human is radically reconfigured by science and technology.

Most of all, Morris borrows from *The Incredible Shrinking Man* a plot in which the hero's achievement of a certain kind of knowledge is purchased with his exile from human society and its meanings. The sublimity produced by both films derives not only from the existential loneliness of the human confronting a silent universe, but from the protagonist's further exile from the human altogether. This, by the way, is one explanation for why *A Brief History* avoids treating much of Hawking's recent personal life, especially the dissolution of Hawking's longstanding marriage to Jane Hawking and his subsequent relationship with his nurse. Although such news is undoubtedly part of our tabloid interest in Hawking and his condition (the erotic, social man erupting even in the midst of seemingly prohibitive physical devastation), this aspect of Hawking's life cuts against Morris's use of him as a figure for the desocialized man of the future.

Echoes of *The Incredible Shrinking Man* operate on all levels in *A Brief History*, beginning with the surprising similarities in the narrators. Both Hawking and Scott Carey, the protagonist of the earlier film, find communicating with others an almost impossible task. Hawking depends entirely on a computer-synthesized voice program, while Carey spends much of his time calling out to others; at one point, he's almost crushed beneath his brother-in-law's shoe, but can't make himself heard. Carey's description of himself as "a man in a state of near-total isolation," imprisoned in "a grey, friendless world of space and time," might well be Hawking speaking about himself; the same is true when Carey observes that, despite his illness, "I was thinking more clearly than I had ever thought before." Carey starts shrinking after being exposed to an atomic cloud while out boating, and then, six months later, being sprayed by a passing truck filled with pesticide. While Hawking doesn't diminish so dramatically, the continued wasting of his body serves as a kind of found metaphor for the social consequences of his work on an expanding cosmos. To say we inhabit an expanding universe is equivalent to incredibly shrinking the *place* of mankind in that universe. (Think of those elementary-school *Gedanken* experiments, where the sun is a basketball in the classroom, and Neptune a Spanish olive in Tahiti.)

The two films also have a common repertoire of images and a shared obsession with scale. Proof of Scott Carey's diminishing size is obtained by superimposing two sets of X-rays of his chest taken a week apart. When Hawking falls ill, Morris lingers over a slow, eerie pan down a shimmering X-ray of his spine, which, while it provides no information about Hawking's condition, does serve to recall the earlier film. Both films also include shots of an annihilating vortex. After a basement water heater bursts in *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, a swirling maelstrom threatens to draw Carey down the drain; in *A Brief History*, matter pulled into the field of a black hole assumes the form of a devouring funnel.

Finally, both *The Incredible Shrinking Man* and *A Brief History of Time* are deeply concerned with gravity, a theme which finds its central visual expression in the image of a staircase. Carey's adventures begin in earnest when he's knocked by a gust of wind into the basement, landing unconscious. After reviving, he stares grief-stricken at the monumental staircase separating him from safety, and much of his energy is spent scaling this and other obstacles. Hawking, too, falls downstairs as his nascent A.L.S. begins to make itself felt. A Cambridge classmate remembers:

> University has these square staircases . . . and Steve actually fell on the stairs coming downstairs and kind of bounced all the way to the bottom. I don't know if he lost consciousness, but he did lose his memory; he couldn't even remember who he was. So we took him to my room, and the first question of course was, "Who am I?" We told him, "You're Steve

> Hawking." . . . And then he asked, "Where am I?" and we told him, "You're at Univ. You just fell down the stairs." We'd say, "Well, do you remember going down to the bar and having a drink on Sunday night?" We'd ask him until he remembered. I think it took about two hours before he could remember actually falling down the stairs.

A Brief History emphasizes Hawking's fall by lavishing a half-dozen different camera setups on the vertiginous Cambridge staircase, including a direct, untilted close-up of the first riser and tread. An odd shot, one might think, since it requires the camera to be placed only inches above the ground—until one remembers that this is just the position of Scott Carey in his basement. Later, the physicist Kip Thorne recalls watching Hawking—now completely unable to walk—drag himself to bed at the end of the evening:

> The way he got upstairs was by grabbing hold of the pillars that supported the banister and pulling himself up with the strength of his own arms, dragging himself up from the ground floor on up to the second story in a long arduous effort. Jane explained that this was an important part of his physical therapy, to maintain his coordination and strength as long as possible. At first, it was heartrending to watch what appeared to be agony until I understood. It's simply a part of life. Pulling himself up the stairs like that.

Though we never see it, our imagining of Hawking laboring up the stairs becomes one of the film's most freighted images. What was only a physical obstacle for Carey here becomes a metaphysical one as well, since in *A Brief History* staircases are associated with isolation, unconsciousness, and forgetting. Gravity is, of course, one of *Brief History*'s overt subjects; but it is also thematized as an inhuman, malevolent force through the frequent use of extreme low camera angles and the somber, circling figures of Philip Glass's score. In both films, consciousness is metaphorically vertical and expresses itself in the struggle to stay upright, to overcome gravity. Hence, Hawking's extraordinary efforts to pull himself up the stairs suggest not merely his indomitability and courage, but his continual effort to answer the questions he asked after falling down the stairs at Cambridge: Who am I? Where do I find myself?

Hawking has been most celebrated, perhaps, for having theorized the existence and nature of black holes, and much of the power of *A Brief History* derives from the way in which black holes, like staircases, take on metaphorical significance. Time and again, black holes are linked with death: physicists imagine astronauts being extruded into spaghetti inside them, or fantasize dying by plunging into their unworld. But they also emerge as zones of ultimate knowledge, modern analogies to the North and South Poles of Romantic writers like Mary Shelley or Edgar Allan Poe—a fact which explains the scientists' eagerness to enter them at any cost. *A Brief History* enlarges the valence of this metaphor by treating Hawking himself as a type of black hole, an impacted self, self-contained; an event horizon fractured only by his oddly expressive face and by the movements of three fingers, which allow him mediated contact with the world. The film's editing suggests an occult relation between Hawking's disease and his knowledge, as if his genius were predicated on his homeopathic resemblance to the object of his study. Eventually, it is intimated, Hawking will likely suffer a kind of information implosion, leaving him unable to signal to the world by any means; he will be a silent object, unable to confirm or deny his own interior experience.

Until that happens, however, Hawking will continue to communicate through his increasingly elaborate prostheses. For years Hawking has spoken by means of a sophisticated computer system, which allows him to tap out messages with the aid of a handheld mouse. If he types *t* and *a* for instance, he gets a scrolling list of all the words beginning *ta*, from which he selects the proper one. Once he has composed a complete response, the computer translates the text through a voice program, and Hawking speaks. But there is no organic connection between Hawking and his impossible voice-over narration. Since it would have taken Hawking weeks to tap the scripted narration for *A Brief History*, Morris arranged for Hawking to send a duplicate of his voice synthesizer to America, where Morris programmed it with versions of the script. Hawking was thus entirely separated from his "own" voice, which pretty much means that he is a state-of-the-art cyborg.

The drama of *A Brief History* is built upon the tension between Hawking's relativistic physics and the classical mechanics it overrides, as the film narrates Hawking's life as a Newtonian black comedy. The low angles, Hawking's mishaps on the stairs, and the story of his car accident in 1991 conspire to render him the butt of a cosmic joke based on the brutal

disjunction between the power of his mind and the weakness of his body. Recalling a time when Hawking's misloaded wheelchair keeled over, a student of Hawking's makes the same point: "I looked up and I noticed Stephen's wheelchair was slowly tipping backward. I tried to run up, but I wasn't able to move nearly rapidly enough to stop him from toppling over backward into the bushes. It was a bit of a shocking sight to see this master of gravity overcome by the weak gravitational force of Earth."

Initially, Hawking's relativized, Alice-in-Wonderland physics, with its infinitely dense black holes, antimatter, wormholes through space, and self-generating worlds, seems akin to the outlandish time machines found in such self-recursive fantasies as *Back to the Future*, films which in their collapsed Newtonianism seem to promise a way out of our mortal predicament. The very first image we see of Hawking in *A Brief History* is a photograph of him cradled in his mother's arms as he asks in voice-over, "How real is time?" Morris crops this shot (and the next one, a paired photo of Hawking held by his father) so that the two figures are isolated in the extreme lefthand corner of the screen against a threatening blackness, an emptiness here signifying the debilitating effects of time, which strands us ever further from our origins and affections. At one point Hawking himself believed that time would run backwards when the universe stopped expanding and began to contract. Once things began to recollapse, he claimed, "people in the contracting phase would live their lives backwards. They would die before they were born and get younger as the universe got smaller again. Eventually, they would disappear back into the womb."

Such talk of the womb reminds one that, as Claudia Springer writes, the erotic pleasure derived from the human interface with computers "results from the computer's offer to lead us into a microelectronic Imaginary where our bodies are obliterated and our consciousness integrated into the matrix. The word matrix originates in the Latin *mater* (meaning both mother and womb), and the first of its several definitions in *Webster's* is 'something within which something else originates or develops.' Computers in popular culture's cyborg imagery extend to us the thrill of metaphoric escape into the comforting security of our mother's womb, which, as Freud, explained, represents our earliest *Heim* (home)."[5] However reductive this seems, just such a pattern of associations is a science-fiction staple, going back as far as the oddly maternal presence of Hal in the second part of *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Through its shots of the child-man Hawking gazing longingly into space, *A Brief History of Time* exploits a similar identification with the matrix of the universe, the ultimate thing "within which something else develops."

But *A Brief History* invokes this techno-oedipal longing only to forestall the possibility of regression. As Morris and Hawking both know, human life cannot be lived on the levels of either particle physics or cosmology. Both *A Brief History* and *The Incredible Shrinking Man* turn, in fact, on the difficulty of locating the spatial and temporal place of the human in the universe. Carey's violation of scale forces him to question his humanity, since to leave behind the dimensions of earthly existence is to leave behind the social matrix that creates human identity. But Carey's ever-diminishing size also allows the film to change not its genre, exactly, but its modality. The movie has three quite distinct sections, which might be described as social allegory, adventure film, and apocalyptic essay. The opening third of the film displays a familiar fifties' anxiety over gender and authority, as Carey shrinks from a successful middle-class Joe, a good-looking guy with a white-collar job and a loving wife (Louise), into a petulant child. His disease first manifests itself in his literal inability to wear the pants in his family, which hang down over his shoes. Carey grows more childish as he shrinks—an infantilization represented by his dwarfed occupation of a chair, and, finally, by his unhappy residence within a dollhouse.

Once Carey falls downstairs, however, *The Incredible Shrinking Man* abruptly turns into a different kind of movie. The still-shrinking Carey now becomes a Robinson Crusoe–like hero, who in his basement adventures obtains water and shelter through his own strength and cunning. In the scene that ends this sequence, Carey kills an enormous spider in order to secure a wedge of stale cake—thus also securing the masculinity undermined by Louise's maternal dominance—only to find that his human hunger is gone. Exhausted, he collapses on a dustheap, only to find upon waking that the film has shifted into its final mode of sublime transcendence. Carey has shrunk again; his clothing—a makeshift knee-length tunic that again recalls Crusoe—now drapes around his bare feet.

In the chiaroscuro of night, Carey is a latter-day prophet (recall that Hawking calls himself a "prophet of doom" concerning the universe), wandering in a miniature desert that is simultaneously barren and charged with force. Notably, the questions he asks in the film's climactic speech are almost identical to those posed by Hawking after his fall at Cambridge:

> What was I? Still a human being? Or was I . . . the man of the future? If there were other bursts of radiation, other clouds drifting across other seas and continents, would other beings follow me into this brave new world? The infinite and the infinitesimal. Suddenly I knew they were really the two ends of the same concept. The unbelievably small and the unbelievably vast eventually meet, like the closing of a gigantic circle. I looked up. . . . The universe, worlds beyond number, God's silver tapestry spread across the night. And in that moment I knew the answer to the riddle of the infinite. . . . That existence begins and ends is man's concept, not Nature's. And I felt my body dwindling, melting, becoming nothing. My fears melted away. And in their place came acceptance. All this vast majesty of creation. It had to mean something. And then I meant something, too. To God, there is no zero. I still exist.[6]

Carey's experience of diminishment, awe, and final exaltation on contemplating the universe is, of course, a classic version of the sublime, and as such represents a dominant mode of science fiction up until around 1975. Since that time, science fiction has largely turned from the heroic penetration of space toward what Vivian Sobchack calls "special effect as special affect": moments such as the departure of the mother ship in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, where the musical tones produced by the ship, like the twinkling lights that play off the upturned, rapturous faces below, symbolize and affirm the power of human sociality.[7] The *locus classicus* for such scenes is the revival of the alien's glowing heartlight in *E.T.*, an event which also revives the human family gathered around him.

The ending of *A Brief History* is oddly anachronistic in that it refuses such warm and cuddly affects in favor of an old-fashioned sublime that it borrows largely from Arnold's film. Visually, the earlier film is remembered in the multiple shots of Hawking in his chair, silhouetted against a field of stars as if he existed in the cosmos itself, an invalid freed from mortal needs. Indeed, Morris originally shot footage in which—as the set representing Hawking's office broke apart—the camera zoomed over Hawking's shoulder and rose into the night sky. This repeats the final shot in *Shrinking Man*, in which a rising crane shot of Carey almost lost in the grass dissolves into a reverse-perspective of the night sky, and then to shots of ever-larger cosmological structures. Though Morris eventually scrapped that footage, the ending he used still echoes that of *Shrinking Man*, as Hawking explains that

> If we do discover a complete theory of the universe, it should in time be understandable in broad principle by everyone, not just a few scientists. Then we shall all, philosophers, scientists, and just ordinary people, be able to take part in the discussion of the question of why it is that we and the universe exist. If we find the answer to that, it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason—for then we would know the mind of God.

These lines—taken from the end of Hawking's book—almost duplicate Carey's rationalization that "All this vast majesty of creation. It had to mean something. And then I meant something, too."

But although this superficially life-affirming tone seems to participate in the mysticism typical of *Shrinking Man*, it seems wiser to treat this promised epiphany as a rhetorical McGuffin. Morris speaks of "the feigned optimism of the idea that we are on the verge of possessing the knowledge of everything, of knowing the mind of God. There's this mixture of unfettered hopefulness with complete despair."[8] Far from suggesting that possession of the Grand Unified Theory—a mathematical formula expressing the four fundamental forces of the universe as versions of one another—would give us a knowledge of "everything," whatever that could mean, the film's emphases on model-making suggest that Hawking's theories are only models of their maker's mind.

Throughout *A Brief History*, Morris emphasizes Hawking's love of games and model-making. Isobel Hawking remembers that at a very early age her son "began taking games very seriously," inventing ones of such complex and open design that they often literally had no end. Indeed, the film hints that models are the only kind of knowledge we possess. This is the point, I take it, of the extreme close-ups of the intricate, beautifully-lit brass clock gears, which are linked by visual analogy and temporal juxtaposition to other image patterns in the film, including the richly illustrated Renaissance cosmological charts, and the cogs and wheels of Hawking's wheelchair/computer rig. The dominant cosmological metaphor for the Enlightenment was that of God as clockmaker; and the intercalated motions of these gears serve at once as an elegy for a simpler model of science, when it still

seemed possible to believe in a classically ordered universe, and as a reminder that despite the relativistic reconstruction of physics, these clocks inexorably tick the moments of Hawking's own brief history.

In the end, it seems necessary to take Hawking's final invocation of the deity ironically. Earlier in the film, Hawking had skeptically revised Einstein's dictum that "God does not play dice with the universe" by saying that not only does God play dice, but sometimes He throws them where you can't see them. Hawking's claim that a Grand Unified Theory would permit us to know the mind of God may be tautological, since it seems as if we as a species are the closest thing to clockmakers in evidence. Certainly, Morris envisions himself as a clockmaker: as, that is, an artisan who replaced the usual vérité settings of documentary with elaborately detailed sets, each one meticulously imagined by an art designer cloistered in a London sound studio.[9] *A Brief History of Time* gives us a model of models which celebrates their artifice even as it qualifies their claims to truth.

Yet even if this is true, not all models are equal. In fact, Morris uses the specific properties of film as a way of giving Hawking a local immortality. Throughout his film, Morris fragments and mechanizes Hawking's body, anatomizing him through angular close-ups of his hand or face or boot. Often, the camera perches behind Hawking, dividing the physicist into his shoulder, his reflection in the computer screen, and the scrolling list of words that graphically realize Hawking's voice. By the film's end, Hawking has completely disappeared into his technologies. *A Brief History of Time* concludes with a shot of Hawking's wheelchair from the back, in which Hawking is only visible metonymically, in the customized license plate reading "Stephen," and in the small red light at the top of his wheelchair, at once a warning and a symbol of Hawking's spirit.[10]

As compensation for this visual dispersal, however, Morris gives Hawking an unreal acoustic wholeness. By fostering the impression that Hawking is "really" narrating the film, Morris gives him new lease on at least a good simulacrum of life, enlisting cinematic illusion to prop up Hawking's social identity. Even as Hawking's cinematic fragmentation testifies to his disintegrating ability to maintain ordinary human contact, his disembodied voice reinforces his claims to a special presence. Hawking's voice-over is a narration from nowhere, which, one might say, can *only* be handled as voice-over, since it transmits from beyond any mortal realm (we never see Hawking engaged in conversation with another person). This is also the condition of Scott Carey, who, despite having been shrunk to subatomic size, provides voice-over for *The Incredible Shrinking Man*. Physically extinguished, Carey is everywhere and nowhere; an intelligence permeating creation, he is explicitly allied with God, for whom there is no zero.

In the world of Errol Morris, however, such comforts are not to be found. Hawking will continue to deteriorate, and in our finitude we are all versions of the wheelchair-bound physicist. Yet, taking his cue from *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, Morris also intimates that Hawking's spirit will continue to exist through the twin prostheses of voice machine and film, as he becomes literally extraterrestrial. In "Lance," Vladimir Nabokov writes of the first interplanetary exploration: "Deep in the human mind, the concept of dying is synonymous with that of leaving the earth. To escape its gravity means to transcend the grave, and a man upon finding himself on another planet has really no way of proving to himself that he is not dead—that the naive old myth has not come true."[11] *A Brief History* lingers on Hawking's face and body, crushed in a Saturnian gravity. But by dissolving Hawking into his voice (and his voice into film), Morris suggests that the human need not return to *humus*, nor gravity lead to the grave.

Late in the film, a physicist speculates that whatever happens inside a black hole is recorded forever, its information invisibly yet permanently preserved within the system. *A Brief History of Time* is Morris's black-hole movie, a time machine that preserves a record of Hawking's implosion even as its intricacies remind us of our human powers of invention, and of the sometimes thrilling ways in which we strive to impersonate God. In so doing, *A Brief History* eschews both of the principal cosmologies proffered by mainstream science fiction. In Morris's hands, Hawking is neither the strange-but-familiar alien E.T., nor the more heroic Scott Carey; the knowledge he seeks is neither a sentimental affirmation of human love nor the grand design of a theistic cosmos. Instead, it is (and Hawking seems to agree with Morris in this; the joke on "the mind of God" was, after all, originally Hawking's own) something more modest: a toy or trial—like Morris's Renaissance maps and clock gears—to use in essaying the world we inhabit for so brief a time.

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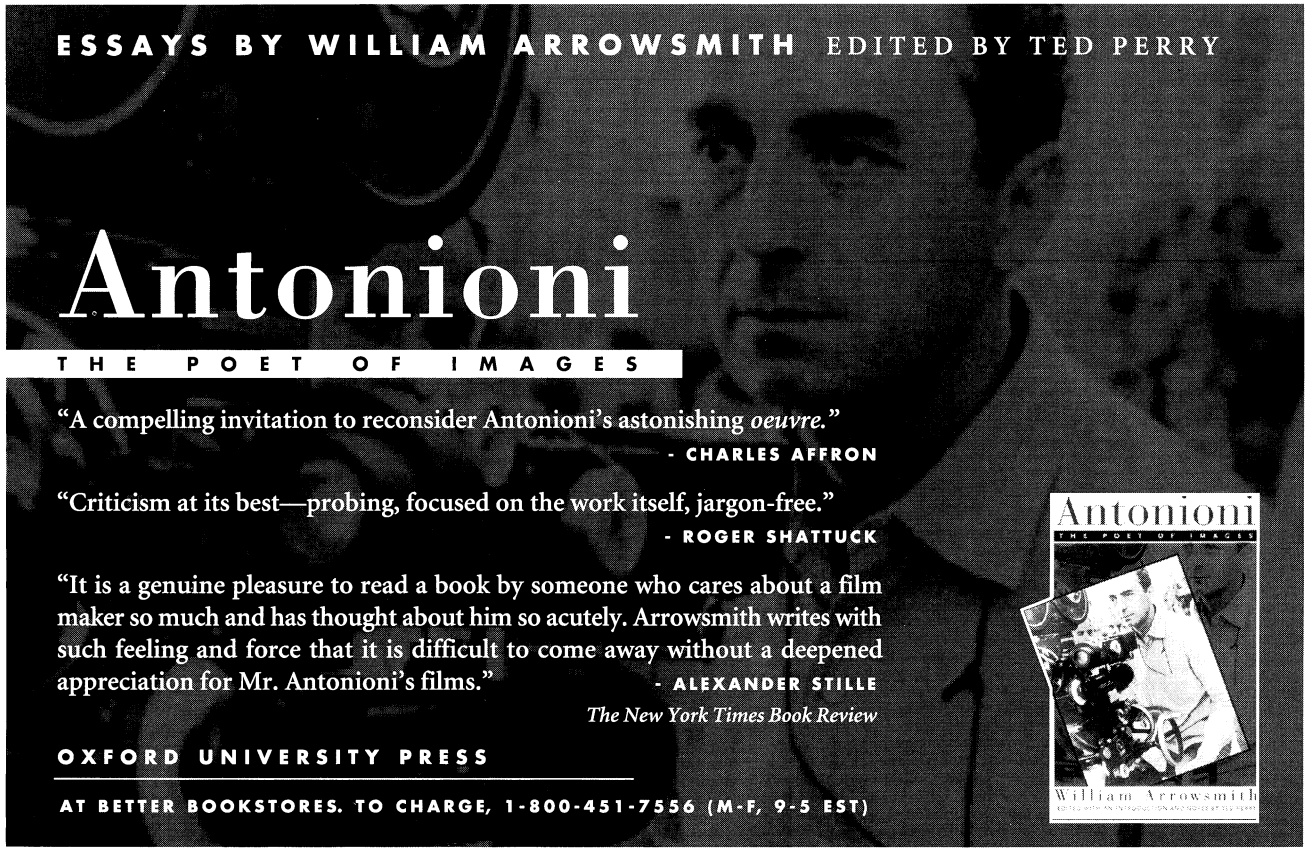
Notes

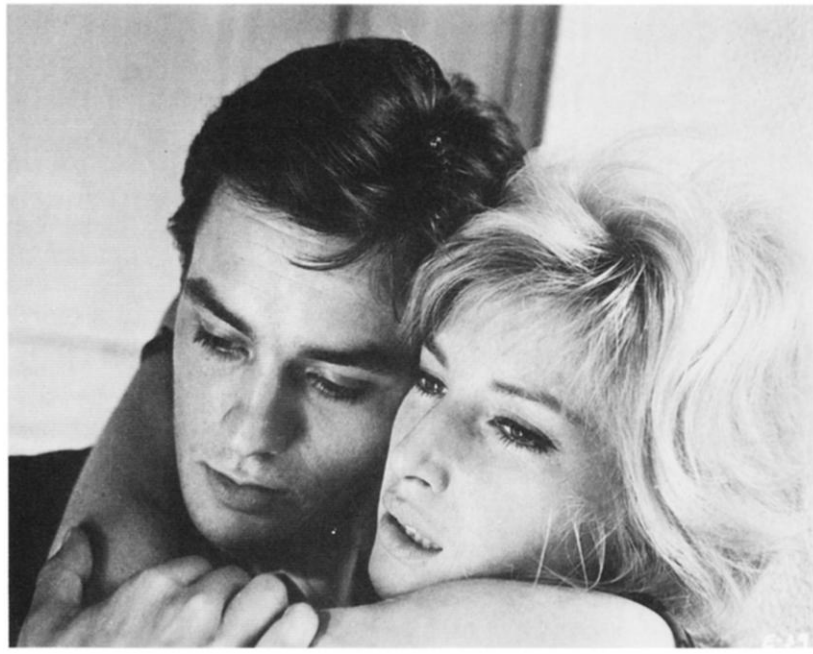
1. Stephen W. Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988).
2. "My idea," Morris notes, "is to allow each character to create a world for themselves, a dream." Philip Gourevitch, "Interviewing the Universe," *The New York Times Sunday Magazine,* August 9, 1992, p. 44.
3. Unless otherwise identified, all quotations from Errol Morris are from a conversation between him and the author in July, 1994.
4. In a conversation I had after completing this paper, Morris has confirmed to me the fact of his indebtedness to *The Incredible Shrinking Man.*
5. Claudia Springer, "The Pleasure of the Interface," *Screen,* vol. 32, no. 3 (Autumn 1991), p. 306.
6. This rhetoric of the cosmological sublime continues to this day. Edwin Dobbs claims that pondering the night sky leaves him impressed not only by its "sheer scale," but by "something else, a stirring in my chest that was no less real, no less inspiring than the stars overhead. What I felt was not diminishment but dilation. My whole being expanded; I felt intensely alive, on the verge of momentous revelation.... Precisely when we grasp the vastness of the universe we also glimpse an equally vast interior, the enormous geography of the soul." *Harper's* (February, 1995), p. 40.
7. See Vivian Sobchack's excellent chapter, "Postfuturism," in her *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film* (New York: Ungar, 1987), pp. 223–305. According to Sobchack, postfuturism begins with *Close Encounters* (1977), which "initiates a new iconography of beatific human wonder.... Heads tilted, eyes gazing upward with childish openness and unfearful expectancy—this is the human fact of transcendence whose emotion is enacted by what it sees.... This alien carousel of a spaceship is not built on principles of economy and rationality, but as a material apotheosis of good feeling, and its presence euphorically fulfills and objectively solves Roy Neary's intense and incompatible desire both to regain his lost patriarchal power and become a born-again child. Following *Close Encounters*, this narrative and thematic signification of special effect as special affect becomes a major formulation of the genre's mainstream." (284)
8. Judith Shulevitz, "A Confederacy of Nerds," *Lingua Franca* (June/July 1992), p. 22.
9. With the exception of Hawking's office—an exact reproduction of his Cambridge workspace—art director Ted Bafaloukos and Morris assigned their interview subjects to particular sets based on the way the subjects would look in them, in a capitulation to mise-en-scène that would be utterly foreign to most documentary film-makers.
10. An ironic version of *E.T.*'s heartlight? The executive producer of *A Brief History* was Steven Spielberg, who, unhappy with the film, pulled his name from the credits.
11. Vladimir Nabokov, "Lance," in *Nabokov's Dozen* (New York: Avon, 1978), p. 181.



Kevin Z. Moore

Eclipsing the Commonplace

The Logic of Alienation in Antonioni's Cinema



Alain Delon and Monica Vitti in *L'eclisse* (above and opposite page)

Talk of alienation in Antonioni's cinema is more often than not negative. Despite Peter Bondanella's observation that characterization in Antonioni's films might not be all that negative, typically Weberian interpretations of disenchantment dominate readings of Antonioni's cinema.[1] I would like to elaborate upon Bondanella's observation by supplying a theoretical framework, and then, noting some instances from Antonioni's work, argue that alienation is more accurately portrayed as negativity in Hegel's and Adorno's sense of a reflection on value. As an instance of negativity, alienation, in this view, is a positive event promoting aesthetic progress in the face of novel experience.

In Weber's by now classic analysis of the modern condition, alienation arises when the self becomes disenchanted with the world and retreats into itself, oftentimes to reflect upon its relations with the world and its relationship with others. In this sense, alienation implies a universal dimension to a self that sequesters itself in order to remain constant or faithful to its emotional dispositions and priorities despite alterations in the world. In retreat, the orthodox self ponders the option to embrace or retreat from a world which either meets or denies its set desires. One problem with this maneuver, however, is that the historical world is overall an exemplification and a realization of human desires, and so by retreating from the historical world, the self retreats from historical aspects of itself as well. Regardless of how we choose to understand this retreat of the self from itself into itself, it is at best paradoxical, and it is this paradox which motivates the logic of alienation and progress in Antonioni's cinema.

Weber's sense of alienation is by and large understood negatively, as a motivated retreat from an unin-

habitable world no longer capable of providing a good home and safe haven for the human spirit. And it is this negative assessment which embodies, in a summary fashion, the notion of alienation most often deployed in interpretations of Antonioni's work. Most critics would agree that alienation is the *property* of being which is the central aesthetic determiner of his representations of modern life, although it is the negative or reclusive effects of this property that are more often than not cited as thematically significant to comprehending the ambiguities of his work. To be alienated in an Antonioni film is to be resentfully situated in an overly industrialized, capital-intensive world that fails to provide a nurturing environment in which the emotions might flourish.

The chief difficulty in criticism's near uniform application of this negative notion of alienation, however, is that it obscures a utopian gesture implicit in it. Although it is true that disconnection and its chief effects, loneliness and isolation, are thematically relevant to Antonioni's cinema, the alienated self's melancholic search for its lost ideal world tells only half the story. The other half is history, or the historical self's search for an accommodation with a world it has itself produced. Rather than an end in itself, alienation, the effect of de-identification and noncorrespondence, is the beginning of a process which, ideally, re-places the self back into a world of its own devising and into a community of like-minded others as well.

The possibility that there exists a positive, communal form of alienation is affirmed by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, who writes, "In each of [Antonioni's] films there is a positive pole and a negative, and a tension between them. The abstraction, the 'ideology' lies mostly at the negative pole. The concrete and actual evidence, the life of the film, is more often positive—and more often neglected by criticism."[2] It is to the neglected "concrete and actual" aspects of alienation that I wish to attend in order to suggest, via hypothesis and example, that there exists a positive dimension to alienation, and that this positive dimension is as much at issue in Antonioni's work as the negative dimension which has garnered most of the attention.

Entertaining this possibility depends, however, upon seeing the self's relation to knowledge and to knowledge about itself in a specific way. Seymour Chatman points out that way when he notes that Antonioni's "preference for contingency over causality suggests an epistemology."[3] Though he does not define what that epistemology could be, I will suggest that it is empirical in character and so equally the source of Nowell-Smith's "concrete and actual evidence" which informs "the [positive] life of the film."[4]

Rather than being "incapable of using his films to argue a political position," as Chatman claims, Antonioni's empirical vision constitutes a reformist political stance, one consonant with what we know of his aesthetic interests.[5] Fundamental to this vision is Antonioni's understanding that there is a world out there which is the source of genuine novelty. It follows that changes in the historical world promote changes in the self if the self is held to be fundamentally historical rather than transcendental. Since the historical world has perceptibly changed, the self must have changed as well, given the ratios of transformation within dialectical materialism. The suspected changes or adjustments within the emotional structure of the subject have not been recorded, thus they remain the obscure object of a speculative desire. Re-

cording those changes requires the gathering of evidence in a series of controlled experiments, guided by the hypothesis that such changes have occurred. The discovery of new emotional states and relationships (evidence) would transform the emotional commonplace (romance) in the ways that remarkable scientific discoveries transform the physical commonplace. Such a transformation would situate the historical self in the historical world once again, thereby calling a close to its flight from history into comforting yet alienating notions of selfhood whose priorities and emotional dispostions are falsely imagined as absolute and unchanging.

During the filming of the Eclipse Trilogy, Antonioni had this to say about film-making and the progress of the human spirit: "What have we done up to now? We have scrutinized, vivisected, analyzed thoroughly the feelings. This we have been able to do. But not to discover new ones."[6] The discovery of new emotions defines the positive, utopian goal of which negative alienation is but the first stage. If we recall Antonioni's early interest in Hegel's and Marx's writings and the transformative or progressivist stance either implies, or his appreciation for Italy's *ermeticismo*, a poetics for which style constitutes resistance to a fascist conformism, or the theme of *Makaroni*, an unfilmed screenplay in which an absolute freedom empowering self and social transformation is achieved at the lawless border of collapsing personal and political domains of authority, then the pertinence of his speculation regarding novel emotions will not seem either absurd or alien to his way of thinking.[7] In all of the above interests, the common theme is the progress of the self (of the spirit) out of the past and into the present as it seeks novel accords or relationships (identifications and sympathies) with an ever-changing world. Antonioni's films, from *Netezza urbana* in1948 to his last full-length feature, *Identificazione di una donna* (1982), investigate the various possibilities for representing historical difference (alienation) arising at the impressionistic and indeterminate edges of mimesis, where generic notions of selfhood are weak and subject to eclipse. In this regard, we might understand the closing words of *Identificazione* to speak the logos of the empirical quest exemplified in various ways by his entire canon: "E dopo?" or "What's next? What is to come?"

It is this search for whatever is next that motivates Antonioni's cinema experiments. The hypothesis that orchestrates the search is this: the self is fundamentally historical and therefore subject to the effects of historical transformation; changes in our emotional constitution have already arisen as a result, but they have not been registered. Our emotional tomorrow is here today, and it is only today's interpretative norms that obscure its appearance. The camera is the microscope Antonioni deploys to discover these hidden "motions" or adjustments of the soul. As a director, or "registrar" (*il registra*), he seeks to record those emotional nuances that escape "Hollywood" film-making, dominated as it is by standardized, generic, and commonplace forms of romantic comprehension. His scientific method of direction and registration requires that he set up his mise-en-scènes so that optimally they will produce the effects his materialist hypothesis tells him he should see.[8] In this way, Antonioni's films are genuinely experimental and not solely experimentalist in the art-house usage of that term.

Suspended strategically between the quiescence of an emotional conformism with nothing left to say and the silence of future possibilities without a voice, Antonioni's protagonists are situated on the horizon of cognition, a liminal zone where representation is unstable and subject to eclipse. It is here, at the edges of the visible, that Antonioni indirectly seeks confirmation of his redemptive hypothesis. Guided by such a vision and situated within an empirical world, his cinema is both cognitive and aesthetic, while his intention to undertake this epistemologically vexed project stems from his interest in creating a genuinely historical art.

With an understanding that these intentions and goals are the productive source of ambiguity in his films, we might quickly review his renowned Cannes statement of aesthetic intent in which he states that the world is divided between a progressive science and a regressive morality. Being is thus frozen between an arresting nostalgia and a desire for a future of difference. Modern science is humbler and less dogmatically inclined than the cultural sciences which moralize, and it is their moral norms that cinema ordinarily honors. Ideally, cinema should alienate or distance its audience from a reflexive pathos which all too easily forges identifications between the self and melodramatic norms that authorize a sick eroticism. Such a dissolution (analysis) of emotional identifications can be achieved by equating the scientific unknown, whose object is nature, with the moral unknown, whose object is human nature. The strongest impediment to human flourishing is a moral cowardice that compels cinema to abandon the adventure of investigative reporting (*L'avventura*) and return to generic or "classical" representations of romance and reality in which neurosis, delusion, and dreams are the

only avenues of escape from the prison house of culture (*Il deserto rosso*).[9]

Despite inherent theoretical problems not at issue here, Antonioni's allegiance to an empirical stance is clear. Along these lines, we might understand the intent of his neorealism to mean that he seeks to document the emotions in cognitive or psychologically actual ways, as opposed to representing them formally and conventionally, in accordance with Hollywood norms. His allegiance to empiricism situates his cinema within the domains of science and technology, where it shares the epistemological and ethical problems to which those domains are typically subject but which do not prohibit them from making the remarkable discoveries that they do.

One immediate effect of seeing his cinema as an empirical practice and his cinematography as investigative reporting within the human sciences is that we can now understand negativity (or negative alienation) "positively." Films in the Eclipse Trilogy, for example, resist the easy identifications forged between viewer and viewed, audience and character, observer and object-subjectivity, upon which the classical Hollywood cinema depends. This methodological resistance situates the viewer in a nonvoyeuristic or objective position where reference is intentionally underdetermined rather than loaded with symbolic (i.e., fetishistic) content.[10] Antonioni is out to explode or blow up all pat interpretive schemes (beliefs) regarding romance and reality by embarking upon cinematographic investigations of our perceptions of emotional perception.

Freed from the biases of secondary interpretation, which forge conventional identifications between sense and sensibility, knower and known, Antonioni's films do not appear all that paradoxical, ambiguous, unmotivated, or even indeterminate.[11] Instead, they appear as good science insofar as they represent an empirically based investigation into real possibilities for emotional progress. Negative alienation, then, is the first stage of the investigation wherein the subject is isolated and scrutinized to see whether or not new psychic structures have arisen over time. Positive alienation, on the other hand, is the final stage, heralded by the discovery of a new emotional "fact" which, in turn, would transform the totality of such facts or culture itself in the same way that the discovery of alien or novel information mandates the reformation of the entire body of scientific facts to which it relates.[12]

L'avventura

Zabriskie Point

As a residual benefit to his empiricist disposition, Antonioni's methodology restores film's original charter to scientifically represent the contemporary in motion, showing the "real" as it really is by a "technically sweet" enhancement and amplification of those invisible articulations which support the gross regularities perceived by the naked eye.[13] The changes any discovery motivates, moreover, would be no more, though no less, startling than those that occurred when cinema shifted from theatrical gesturing to naturalistic displays as the normative center of its emotional language.[14] Any power his art might forfeit by eschewing common expressive norms it would regain as the drama of science in which discovery as cognition replaces discovery as recognition as the main source of delight and suspense, method replacing form as the center of organizational interest.

Negative alienation, then, does no more than name the necessity for which positive alienation supplies the want. Thus the goal of positive alienation is correspondence and community, just as the goal of negative alienation is individuality and a contemplative isolation. The dialectic between negative and positive alienation defines the normative flow of aesthetic engagement and disengagement within healthy cultures, and so it is imperative that Antonioni emphasize the positive if he is to offer cinema as one means by which an erotically sick culture might return to moral health. Thus the backward-looking melancholia fostered by the negative alienation displayed in *L'avventura* finds its forward-looking counter-direction in the "adventure" or quest inaugurated in that film. That adventure concludes, I argue, in *L'eclisse*, when the alienated self finds an other alienated like herself, and together they disappear into the contemporary world, their disappearance a sign that they no longer stand apart from it.

While the progression from negative to positive alienation is utopian at best and creates as many problems as it tries to solve, these are nevertheless the right problems for a rationally interested cinematic investigation of the interplay between history and aesthetics. Moreover, if an argument is "weak" or even unconvincing, the type of argument that it is may be of interest because it contributes to the aesthetic achievement associated with the presentation of the argument. In the present case, these considerations are crucial if we are to progress beyond detailed rehearsals of a, by now, generic understanding of modernist alienation in Antonioni's cinema.

The logic and goals of positive alienation are most apparent in *L'eclisse*. A new sensibility arises in this film, calling to a successful close the quest that Anna began in *L'avventura*.

Each film in the Eclipse Trilogy opens with a scene of divorce or alienation from the familiar, yet only two of the three films (*L'avventura* and *La notte*) conclude tragically, with the alienated subjects pathetically retreating back into the life-threatening world of available erotic identifications, having incurred on their quest the added burden of futility and despair. The melancholia which suffuses these two films arises from the protagonists' failure to achieve their desired ideal of reconciliation or even to sustain the possibility for such; they remain *negatively* alienated. In *L'eclisse*, however, things turn out differently. Vittoria remains *positively* alienated, and she is rewarded for her resistance to the temptations of the emotional commonplace with the discovery of a new emotion or of novel emotional reserves, which is perhaps why Antonioni names her "Victory."

L'eclisse opens by recapitulating the establishing scenes in all films in the trilogy. In effect, the experiment begins again in order to test its conclusions once more. Vittoria's disappearance, or alienation, from the familiar recalls Anna's, and indeed Monica Vitti plays both Claudia, the woman who substitutes for Anna in Anna's life, as well as Vittoria, who returns to complete the quest as a victorious Anna, the woman who finds what she wants.

When we first see her, Vittoria is visibly beside herself, an emotion whose metaphysical resonance implies an internal displacement engendered by self-reflection. The self she is beside is her "old" self, constituted of those emotional "residues" and "dead feelings" which, when filming an eclipse in Florence, Antonioni noted were the chief inhibitors of emotional progress.[15] At the beginning of her struggle to be free of Riccardo, her lover of ten years, and the deadening past he represents, Vittoria stands against an action painting whose conceptual indeterminacy exemplifies her internal condition. At this turning point in her life, she identifies with the sublime indeterminacy of the action painting rather than with the beautiful, determinated norms and ends of institutionalized erotic behavior. She is determined to divorce herself from her "beautiful" cultured world, and this determination inaugurates her aesthetic crisis.[16]

Vittoria wants to divorce herself from the deadening claustrophobia of high modern culture, represented by Riccardo at its liberal, cosmopolitan, and refined best, in order to resituate herself within the enabling conditions of authentic cultural (aesthetic) production. As good as Riccardo's cultural world is, it is not good enough, not lively enough, to engage her emerging sensibility. Baffled by her desire to alienate herself from all that seems to him beautiful and desirable, Riccardo asks Vittoria to marry him. His offer misses its mark because it mistakes her desire for something different as a desire for a more normative role within their relationship and within their society.

Rather than settle for the established best, Vittoria resists Riccardo, as well as the good life of the Roman bourgeoisie, which, the film makes clear, is predicated upon the stock market (*la boursa*) and the art market or culture industry (*la dolce vita*). Acting as a counterpoint to Italian conformist postures, she refuses to conform to the dominant passions of the day. Italy's romance with *materialismo* and capital hold no interest for her. She makes her position clear later on when she asks the stockbroker Piero, "What kind of passion is that?"[17] Visiting the stock market, she is the only person without a passionate concern for its world-constituting interests. Alienated from a passionately materialist culture, she is divorced from all contemporary romantic investments and so at liberty to redirect her erotic capital toward the more enlightened enterprise of aesthetic renewal.

Significantly, Vittoria first overcomes established aesthetic norms when she plunges her hand into what appears to be an abstract painting comprised of geometric shapes. As it turns out, the painting is "really" a configuration of concrete objects behind a picture frame. By rearranging the objects in the frame, she demonstrates to herself (and to us) that the aesthetic is not a realm of fixity but a fluid domain subject to choice and human determinations. By daring to pierce the frame, she acknowledges the priority of method over norms, experiment over interpretation, inquiry over explanation, practice over speculation; and these priorities will guide her as she seeks to rearrange the composition or frame of human life. Symbolically, she sets her hand against all abstract expressionisms rendered absolute and definitive by cultural norms held to be transcendental. Her rearrangement of the concrete figures within the frame returns the frozen, transcendental world of the universally human to the concrete and developing realm of particular human interests, choices, and situations called history.

Because she is willing to abstract (alienate) herself from a delusively concrete world of determinative abstract expressionisms, she becomes the only person in the film who is not alienated from the fluid, historical, and mobile "nature" of the self. Her reengagement with the concrete aspects of life, symbolized by her breaking into the frame, begins her journey out of the shelter of beautiful norms and into the empirical world of indeterminate experience. At this point in her quest,

she is like that which she has pointed to: a picture of indeterminacy, a person without a frame to contain or define her desires.

Vittoria views the present as an ashen world of burnt-out passions (she even removes from the picture frame an ashtray laden with butts). Not willing to go back to such a world, she chooses to go forward. Thus, she walks an edge zone between the exhausted past and an emergent future. This zone is further defined when Riccardo asks her how she feels. She responds, "I don't know." Her reply suggests the nescience of the self when confronted with feelings for which there is no specific name. She feels something, but there is no available way to frame the way that she feels. At this point, she represents herself as an abstract portrait of desire without or beyond language. She will all but say this when she asserts her will to divorce herself from Riccardo by telling him that she will no longer translate for him, though she knows another woman who will. Her refusal to translate implies that she would rather remain silent and thereby preserve the integrity of her difference than deploy accommodations that would carry some of her meaning but would not communicate what she is about.

Divorced from all romances and marriages Italian-style, Vittoria becomes a radical individual who journeys through old Rome, new Rome (E.U.R.), her girlhood room, and an elegant Roman apartment like an alien visitor from the future, amazed at the antique character of the present. To represent her sense of the pastness of the present, Antonioni shoots her walking beneath a water tower that hovers over her like a flying saucer. At Marta's apartment, Vittoria, in her desire "not to translate," or have past conventions speak for her present self, goes so far as to pretend to be African. Decorated with things African, the apartment suggests a foreign country. The African landscapes Vittoria sees there arouse her desire to escape the contemporary into a place positively alien. Seeking to identify with the alien, Vittoria dons an African costume and paints her body black, after which she asks Marta, the in-house expert who has lived in Africa, "Do I look it?" Vittoria then dances her way into a bedroom muralled by a panorama of Lake Naivasha in Nairobi, and Antonioni shoots the sequence as though she were stepping into a picture, going "through the looking glass" into a foreign world.

Vittoria's African dance does not, however, bring her the positive alienation she seeks. Instead, she enacts a culturally tame expression of difference, one cultivated by both modern artist and capitalist, whose "primitivist" fantasies are devoid of all historical, material substance except the desire for difference.[18] The futility of her iconic appropriation of difference is made apparent in the scene immediately following, in which Marta's black dog runs away to join a tribe of strays only to be discovered by Vittoria walking on its hind legs, paw extended in anticipation of a genteel

Monica Vitti painted black for *L'eclisse*

handshake. Even the animals, it seems, are conformists whose "otherness" has been tamed.

At play in Vittoria's blackface masque is the issue of logical precedence and experimental method. Vittoria must experience a novel emotion of her own as the sign of her reengagement with the world of experience, after which she can construct an adequate symbol to communicate its salience to others. The authentic alienation she seeks in Marta's apartment is not to be found in modernism's alien chic, which, rather than exceed contemporary norms, reinstates them by other means (styles). Costumes, decor, and photographs, no matter how authentic, are at best cosmetic changes. Moreover, the available past suggested by primitivist fantasies is not the place where Vittoria will find an authentic foreign or alien experience. Primitivism can suggest a model or picture of what she is looking for, but the foreignness she seeks must be her own, and can only evolve out of her relationship with the modern world.

A clue to the source of the genuinely modern emotion she seeks arises immediately afterward, when she is drawn to a strange, rhythmic sound that reminds her of the recorded African music to which she had danced at Marta's apartment. Seeking the source of the lyrical chimes, she discovers that the music is produced "naturally" by metal highway fence poles blowing in the wind. The image is unmistakably aeolian, and the aeolean harp is unmistakably empirical in its emblemizing immediate or intuitive relationships between self and world, or, more concretely, between body and experience via impressions. As Vittoria listens in wonder to the metallic harp, we see the central icon of her empirical redemption. Indeed, the next time we see her she is flying high over the labyrinth of old Rome. She will ask the pilot to dive into a cloud which, he informs her, is actually "snow suspended in water." The empirical emphasis in both scenes is clear: redemption arrives by our keeping in touch with the nebulous, obscure, and actual character of reality which is the source of our historical novelty and renewal.

Vittoria continues her quest for difference through a sequence of scenes exemplifying the dead and petrified emotions that dominate the present. She even purchases a flower imprisoned in stone, signalling the status of both life and art. A drunken man, who unsuccessfully tries to engage Vittoria's attention, steals Piero's car, loses control, and plunges to his death in the Tevere; the crowds that gather on the following day to see him fished up laugh and enjoy the event as though it were a festive occasion. The stock market collapses, bringing in its wake the passionate disappointment of millions, and a jazz pianist is noted as "good" because he is an "old timer," left over from an age when the world and the self were attuned. Piero needs medicine to sleep; Vittoria walks through a half-built city on the periphery of Rome where she impulsively engages in role reversals, chasing after a man with a beautiful face. Just before she and Piero embrace for the first time, they are positioned in the middle of a black-and-white striated crosswalk where she tells him, "We are halfway there" ("siamo metà"). By this time it is apparent that she wants to love, but not in the old way, which would only lead to a return of the old scene of divorce with Riccardo.

Piero will invite Vittoria to his parents' staid apartment to impress and seduce her. Yet its typical antique beauty does not impress her, and she asks him why he did not take her to his "small home," which at least had the value of being properly his. She feels trapped and frightened in the apartment, particularly when positioned between the oval portraits of his parents. There, ringed round by the past and its inevitable return as the present in her life, she tells Piero she "loves to think one should *not* know the other" when in a relationship, after which she advises him, "Maybe we should not love at all?" as a way of differently relating. She will reassert her view when, later, she tells him, "I wish I did not love you or that I loved you better." She desires either to not love him at all or to love him in a better way in order to preserve their relationship from contamination by conventional engagements. Her desire to avoid commonplace romance is another sign that she has engaged a positive form of alienation that will move her toward unconventional future correspondences.

Confirmation of the novel emotion Vittoria desires first arises in E.U.R's park and then in Piero's office, after hours. As marginal areas at the center of the sociocultural system, both environments invite the engendering of novelty or difference which can only arise at the edges or outer boundaries of reference where concepts shade into sensations and impressions speak louder than words. Both the park and the after-hours office suggest this edge zone, where and when business as usual gives place to the unusual business of making love in a new way.

Vittoria and Piero arrive at the park through a sequence whose rapid dislocations suggest the immediacy of a felt intuition; after they fall on the bed kissing each other ecstatically, they awake in the park. Piero tells her that he feels he has entered a "foreign country," to which she replies, "How strange! That's

how you make me feel." He responds by asking, "Then you won't marry me?" His mistake is identical to Riccardo's. That they make each other "feel foreign" throws Piero off because he has not yet understood that this is what she wants and that their shared alienation will be the source of a novel correspondence.

This distinction is perhaps what led Antonioni to avoid a tragic ending for *L'eclisse* like those of *L'avventura*, *La notte*, and *Il deserto rosso*.[19] That he changed the conclusion so that *L'eclisse* would not end tragically should tell us something about how to read Vittoria's alienation. Piero, in turn, must learn to read Vittoria differently and learn to sympathize with her difference. When he later proves himself capable of understanding her, this shared understanding establishes alienation as a collective project of aesthetic renewal, the shared center of the new world of differences and the productive source of a truly modern romance. If, that is, to invent a new language would be to invent a new manner of being, as Wittgenstein has suggested, than it is equally true that to invent a new manner of being would compel us to invent a new language to suit its dispositions.[20] Empirically speaking, evidence must precede language, and it is just this evidence that Antonioni conceptually offers in *L'eclisse*.

A second instance of the same misperception and adjustment arises when Piero questions Vittoria about marriage, and she replies, "I am not nostalgic for marriage." Her response is ideal in its commitment to differ from the presiding norms and values determining erotic life. She does not look back to a safe haven but forward, in the hope of arriving at a different place. Equally to the point, her not missing "missing" is, in itself, an achieved finding insofar as the absence of nostalgia implies that she has freed herself from any sense that she lacks something in not wanting what is "natural," conventional. Her alienation is not established nostalgically, by a negative reflex toward a lost or unachieved ideal, but positively, in the expectation of finding an unfound ideal: the novel emotion.

That Piero eventually understands her alienation becomes evident when he and Vittoria "re-enact themselves as they behaved during the earlier love scene . . . exaggerating the comical aspects of their gestures and attitudes."[21] Their mime suggests an act of mastery over generic forms of romance achieved by advancing empathy to the level of critique. Beside themselves with laughter as they parody their own love-making as well as that of other couples, Vittoria and Piero methodically alienate themselves from the very force of desire that compelled them to intimate identifications in the first place. Moreover, their self-reflexive play upon a moment with generic claims to maximum seriousness in life and in art "makes light" of the weight of the traditional moment when destinies are fixed, thereby producing a qualitatively different moment empowered to differently determine their future.

Just as they laughed together at the empty box of chocolates he had offered her (a sign of the emptiness of past romantic forms), their parody compels them to remain "beside themselves" with laughter as they make love. Through parody, they exhaust and transform romance as a serious form of engagement and thereby place themselves outside the frame of institutionalized erotic practices and the emotions authorized by them. Their enlightened mimesis enables Vittoria and Piero to evade entrapment within invariant and ideologically frozen regimes of private behavior as they renew their desire for a novel emotion in whose light they now perceive the world. The play of romance, moreover, returns romance to history as but one of the many human practices subject to transformation as the world is transformed in and through the totality of those practices and the social relations they encourage. At this cumulative moment to all rescue operations in the Eclipse Trilogy, Vittoria's relationship with Piero is sustained by the priority of difference (parody); she has found what she wants by differing, by remaining different, and then by encouraging Piero to feel the difference. In the end, then, Vittoria's alienation becomes theirs.

This difference is further implied when, after making love in Piero's office—a love-making that encourages him to disconnect all phones in a scene demonstrating his refusal to return to business as usual—the couple promises to meet "tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, and the day after the day after that" in "the same place at eight o'clock." Having designated the time and place of their relationship, they disappear from the scene of representation. Their disappearance from the world of negatively alienated life suggests the positive quality of their collective alienation. Thus although it is true that *L'eclisse* ends with a vision of a benighted and anxious world, Piero and Vittoria are not in this world. They have evolved (disappeared), and their disappearance implies that the aim of the experiment in emotional progress has been achieved. Their story, then, concludes logically where and when it should, at the time and place where alienation becomes a life-practice whose eternal return guarantees a history to the aesthetics of selfhood.

Immediately before she disappears with Piero,

Zabriskie Point

however, we see Vittoria walking beneath a spreading tree. When she left Riccardo, she wanted to walk alone in the woods at dawn. Then, we saw her gazing at the trees through a picture window. Now, we see her once more "walk into the picture" which is not a picture at all but the sensorium of the world, the source of all aesthetic delight. The implication here is that she is finally out there, where she wants to be, in a world of process and change. Her final walk further recalls the moment when she and Piero kissed, first behind a glass pane, then beyond the glass where their lips touched. These scenes of contact and merger with the world and with other bodies correspond to the empirical mise-en-scènes that conclude other "investigative" films such as *Blow-Up*, *Zabriskie Point*, and *Identificazione di una donna*, in which the great sensorium of experience blows up or consumes the formal framework of conventional perception.

"Empiricism," Kant advised, "is based on touch, but rationalism on a necessity which can be seen."[22] Vittoria's story concludes then on an empirical note, with her touching, or getting in touch with, the empirical world. She has progressed beyond things that can be named or seen to a place where feeling precedes seeing and naming. Her and Piero's final absence is our conceptual guarantee that they no longer stand apart from the world but have merged with it and that the long-awaited eclipse of the commonplace has arrived.

The eclipse that concludes the film reinstates the paradox of alienation which suffuses the trilogy. For Vittoria and Piero, eclipsing the commonplace is a positive, aesthetic event. For the world at large, holding on to its dissipating romantic heritage for dear life, it is a negative event. Antonioni strongly suggests this bivalence by concluding *L'eclisse* with the illumina-

tion of a street lamp. The street lamp bears a strong formal resemblance to the table lamp that filled the screen when the film began. Looming in close-up, the table lamp illuminates a row of books which suggest the cultured life that Riccardo and Vittoria have shared. The comparison between opening and closing scenes is furthered when we note that the table lamp illuminates an unnaturally darkened room, for day has dawned. Yet neither Riccardo nor Vittoria notice its arrival because they are engaged in a long and painful discussion regarding their imminent separation.

The street lamp that concludes the film takes us back to this illuminating beginning, only now Antonioni casts the entire world as Riccardo's artificially lit study. Cultural discourses, the comparison suggests, and the art of interpretation are helpless to move things forward (or to move Vittoria at all); beauty offers enthrallment, not liberation. By attending to culture's rational, cognitive interests, however, we break free of exhausting hermeneutic circles in which emotional understanding is repetitious, fatiguing, and conventional because universalistic myths of the self deny histories to personhood. By implying a sense of history to the self, we begin to think concretely about the historicity of the spirit, after which we can investigate the self scientifically, "experimentally," and experientially. This is what Antonioni has attempted in this film, which, as its title suggests, belongs to the science of art and aesthetics.

To reinforce this awareness, Antonioni concludes *L'eclisse* with a montage that displays the constructed character of perception. In the montage, we see images we have seen before, only now we see them differently, in a new and alien way, our alien vision perhaps approximating Vittoria's when, at the beginning of her quest, she plunged her hand into the picture frame and rearranged the items within. Tellingly, the montage is comprised of mostly circular images of repetition, exhaustion, and incompletion: a jockey in his traces, the sports arena at E.U.R., the bus route at the end of the line, half-built modern buildings, and a water barrel emptying into a gutter. Overall, we can assume that Vittoria's experiment in life has succeeded because she is absent from a world dominated by scenes of emotional repetition and exhaustion. Like Anna, whose disappearance opened the quest for difference in the Eclipse Trilogy, Vittoria also uses disappearance, but this time in order to conclude that quest. Yet unlike Anna, who disappears alone, Vittoria disappears with Piero.

To this epistemically graphic representation, Antonioni supplies two written texts, both appearing as headlines in *L'espresso*. The first reads: "The Atomic Age," suggesting the radical particularity of sensation free of the concept, the putative source of experience in art and science; and the second reads: "The Peace Is Weak," implying that all accords are temporal, negotiable, and volatile, thus asserting the methodological value of science and the aesthetic. The headlines also evoke thoughts of nuclear destruction unless novel social accords are reached, as well as the dawning of a new era—for which new relationships are appropriate but weak, because experimental, and subject to further scrutiny and renegotiation (further eclipse).

In the concluding montage, we witness form uniting with content to reveal method as theory of knowledge. Poised in the eternally returning time and place of alienation (the transformative position within the logic of structure), *L'eclisse* closes with a global image of negativity in which all established orders are on the verge of becoming atomized, blown up, or erased—and with good reason. In this respect, *L'eclisse* ends where and when it logically should by suggesting the two alternatives that the trilogy has established: either the present fades as the future emerges or the present remains imprisoned within universalistic interpretive schemes, the modern becoming the postmodern and so on and so forth into the night. And in understanding the aesthetic options presented by paradox, we see that Vittoria's quest has exemplified a form of alienation which, rather than negative, is a positively inclined "life politics concerned with human self-actualisation, both on the level of the individual and collectively." [23] Such a life politics can only be achieved, Antonioni implies, within an empirical framework, and it is from within such a framework of knowledge that Vittoria emerges from "the shadow which emancipatory politics has cast" on the emotional commonplace, and then goes forward to realize a genuinely contemporary identity, one consonant with the historical world and not alienated from it. [24]

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Notes

1. Peter Bondanella, *Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present* (New York: Continuum, 1994). Neurosis, for

Bondanella, arises in Antonioni's work when his characters fail to adapt to the modern world. He writes, "Guiliana's neurosis [in *Red Desert*] is caused by a failure to adapt to the new world. Her alienation is not the result of her supposedly dehumanized and hostile surroundings," but of her inability to appreciate a technologically remarkable world. p. 218.

2. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, "Shape Around a Black Point," *Sight and Sound* 33 (Winter 1963-64), p. 17.
3. Seymour Chatman, *Antonioni or The Surface of the World* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), p. 78.
4. Understanding Antonioni's cinema as empiricist-tending is not new; understanding it as strictly and idealistically empirical is. See, for example, David Cook's summary assessment of Antonioni's "new style" as partly due to his emphasizing "the overwhelming importance of the material environment on the interior life of his characters," in David Cook, *The History of Narrative Film*, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), p. 627.
5. Chatman, p. 78.
6. Michelangelo Antonioni, *Screenplays of Antonioni* (New York: Orion Press, 1963), p. x.
7. *Ermeticismo* is a poetic movement specific to Florence between the two world wars. For writers such as Gadda, Vittorini, Montale, Landolfi, Contini, and De Robertis, style constituted a formal polemic against realistic representational modes of ordinary mimesis. Antonioni's *Makaroni* (1958), written with Tonio Guerra, has as its premise the polling of soldiers recently returned from World War II. The interlocutor asks the men to describe the best and the worst period of the war for them. The worst was, predictably, the concentration camps, but the best, surprisingly, turns out to be the period immediately following the peace, when the Germans had fled and the Americans had not yet arrived. Then, "disorder and chaos reigned; it was freedom in its ultimate state." See *Makaroni*, in Ted Perry and Rene Prieto, *Michelangelo Antonioni: A Guide to References and Resources* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1986), p. 202.
8. A controlled mise-en-scène and random information gathering are both essential to scientific film-making. This process is nicely summarized by Sean Morris in this way: Once you frame your experiment and put the cameras in place, "you take a shot of a thing without really knowing what its going to do . . . other than you know the beginning stage and the end stage you're aiming at. But in between that, it's fairy-tale land. It's a surprise every minute." Sean Morris, "Still Motion," *Nova* (Oxford Film Institute, 1981).
9. A summary of Antonioni's Cannes statement can be found in Seymour Chatman and Guido Fink, *L'avventura: Michelangelo Antonioni, Director* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1989), pp. 177–79.
10. Underdetermination of the sign is central to empiricist epistemology as well as to realists such as André Bazin, who claim that "the immanent ambiguity of reality" occasioned by our awareness that "events have an undetermined outcome" is the genuine source of cinematic realism's power and mystery. See André Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, vol. 1 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967), p. 46.
11. Sam Rohdie is the most recent critic to summarize at length these stylistic effects of Antonioni's cinema. See *Antonioni* (London: BFI Publications, 1990).
12. This is Willard Van Orman Quine's picture, and it has become extremely widespread because of his influence. Quine describes robust empiricism this way: "The totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs, from the most casual matters of geography and history to the profoundest laws of atomic physics or even of pure mathematics and logic, is a man-made fabric which impinges on experience only along the edges. Or, to change the figure, total science is like a field of force whose boundary conditions are experience. A conflict with experience at the periphery occasions readjustments in the interior of the field." (42) The drama of Antonioni's films is occasioned by the conflict between sensation, experience, and concept or, as Quine would have it, between the periphery and interior of the self. See W. Van Orman Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," in *From a Logical Point of View*, 2nd ed., rev. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 20–46.
13. "Technically sweet," or *technicamente dolce,* is the title of an unfilmed Antonioni script written shortly after *L'eclisse*. Antonioni changed the screenplay's title from *La giungla* (*The Jungle*) shortly after hearing this comment of Robert Oppenheimer's regarding the atomic bomb: "In my opinion, if one has a glimpse of something that seems technically sweet, one attacks this thing and achieves it." Technically sweet portrayals of world-dissolving "blow-ups" are central to films from *L'eclisse* through *Zabriskie Point* and *Identificazione di una donna*. R. T. Witcombe, *The New Italian Cinema: Studies in Dance and Despair* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 80.
14. Charles Musser briefly discusses the shift in early cinema from *presentational* or theatrical acting styles, set designs, and visual compositions to naturalistic representational modes. I see no reason why we should not see Antonioni as continuing this line of "realistic" development by his shifting from "naturalistic" representations become generic to more finely grained or cognitively accurate representations than those offered by standard cinema. Such an updating of emotional representations would perhaps be as difficult for audiences to see or comprehend as were the "modern" naturalistic styles for audiences used to presentational or theatrical styles of representation, and this might be a further source of ambiguity or incomprehension in Antonioni's films. See Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907*. Volume 1 of *The History of American Cinema*, Charles Harpole, gen. ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990), p. 3.
15. Antonioni, *Screenplays*, p. x.
16. In the regard, Vittoria initiates Adorno's project for aesthetic renewal, which he characterizes in this way: "'How lovely!' becomes an excuse for an existence outrageously unlovely, and there is no longer beauty or consolation except in the gaze falling on horror, withstanding it, and in unalleviated consciousness of negativity holding fast to the possibility of what is better. . . . All collaboration, all the human worth of social mixing and participation,

merely masks a tacit acceptance of inhumanity." Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (New York: Verso, 1974), p. 25. We should keep in mind, too, that in *La notte,* Tomasso writes an article on Adorno for *Europa Literaria* which Giovanni Pontano declares to be very good. Adorno's position, that the culture of beauty is unlovely, seems to be at issue in the entire trilogy.

17. All translations from the Italian are mine, except where otherwise noted.
18. Two points are at issue here. First, modernist primitivism is a mannerism which contains rather than liberates the desire for or even a genuine appreciation of difference or otherness. Second, as a continuation of the dominant tendencies of romantic art, primitivism "cultivates" rather than deviates from neoclassicism's aesthetic authority. For an instructive account of the normative content of modernist primitivism, see Hal Foster, "The 'Primitive' Unconscious of Modern Art," *October* 34 (Fall 1985), pp. 45-71; for a critique of the normative role of interpretation which denies art a role in the construction of difference, see Arthur Danto, "The End of Art," in *The Philosophical Disenfranchment of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 81–117.
19. Ian Cameron and Robin Wood, *Antonioni* (New York: Praeger, 1971), p. 104.
20. In this light we might see Vittoria as the femme fatale in a feminist drama of alienation from patriarchal values and views regarding romance and the erotic. Were this the case, my argument would then be the same as Mary Ann Doane's: "Since feminists are forced to search out symbols from a lexicon that does not yet exist, their acceptance of the *femme fatale* [in noir films] as a sign of strength in an unwritten history must also and simultaneously involve an understanding and assessment of all the epistemological baggage she carries along with her." It is the importance of this "epistemological baggage" and the politics of empiricism which I have been at pains to elaborate. Doane, "*Gilda*: Epistemology as Striptease," *Camera Obscura* 11, p. 15.
21. Antonioni, *Screenplays*, p. 353.
22. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Lewis White Beck, in *The Library of Liberal Arts* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956), p. 14.
23. Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 7.
24. This is Giddens' summary assessment of the most urgent political agenda for the self in late modernity (see p. 7).

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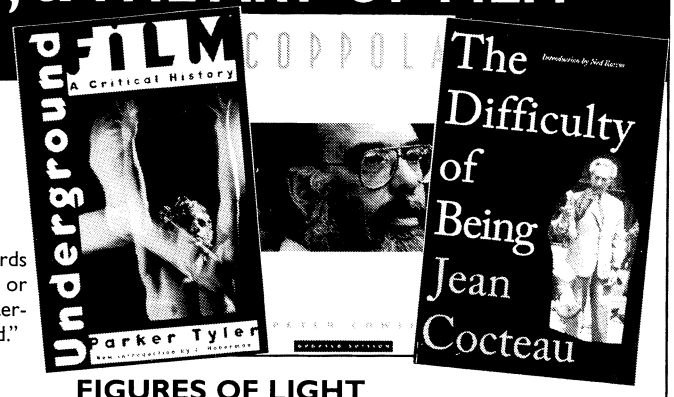

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Film Review

Ready to Wear (Prêt-à-Porter)

Producer/director: Robert Altman. Screenplay: Altman, Barbara Shulgasser. Cinematographers: Pierre Mignot, Jean Lépine. Editor: Geraldine Peroni. Music: Michel Legrand.

First, the facts.

Robert Altman's new film is not a "behind-the-scenes" look at the fashion world. Nor is it a particularly *fashionable* treatment of that world. Nor is it a conventional narrative complete with audience-identification protagonist and tidy plot. Nor is it much like *Nashville*, despite its many characters and multiple vignettes.

That's why it disappointed so many. The movie flew in the face of all expectation.

Altman's new cinematic panorama should be seen on its own terms first—then you can throw knives at the screen if you see fit. *Ready to Wear* is an idiosyncratic odyssey, an odd essay film with its own peculiar pattern and design. Far from being "unfocused," "flimsy," or "vapid" (recent critical put-downs), every element in the film—even down to the dogshit everyone's stepping in—has a rhyme and reason, and builds up carefully to the sublime finale: designer Simone Lo's naked *défilé*.

Although the movie juggles about three dozen characters and their overlapping situations, there emerges, amid the hustle and bustle of the splintered narrative, a dominant story line—that of Simone Lo (Anouk Aimée)—around which all others revolve like illuminating satellites.

What gets things rolling is Sergei Oblomov (Marcello Mastroianni), a 70-something master tailor who leaves Russia after the collapse of Soviet Communism and heads west in search of the love of his youth, his abandoned wife Isabella de la Fontaine (Sophia Loren). To get to her, he has secretly contacted her present husband, Olivier de la Fontaine, who is head of the French Fashion Council. Olivier meets Sergei at the airport and brings him back to Paris, but during a traffic jam on Pont Alexandre III, Olivier unexpectedly dies a déclassé death: he chokes on a piece of ham. Panicked, Sergei hops out of the limousine, and the chauffeur screams murder. Sergei jumps into the Seine. Although he's been falsely accused, he's safe: the authorities can't identify him because the only evidence they have are photos of what he was wearing.

Everyone in the fashion world seems more pleased than saddened by Olivier's sudden demise. Apparently he wasn't such a nice guy, and despite several claims by TV reporters that his death has eclipsed Paris's most important fashion week, *prêt-à-porter* proceeds as usual without a morsel of mourning—not even from his wife. Isabella thinks her husband is no more than the dog turd she steps in at the beginning of the film.

Simone Lo (changed from the original Lowenthal) acts more the widow, and everyone treats her as one—it's no secret she was Olivier's lover. Although she readily admits that she didn't like Olivier either, Simone seems to have some depth, unlike the other designers, who come off as frivolous, trendy, and self-important. Simone stands out as a genuine artist. Simone's son, Jack (Rupert Everett), makes a witty remark to characterize his mother: "You know, my mother makes dresses for herself. Dressing for men has never particularly interested her, although she's certainly undressed for a few of them. The main difference between men and women in fashion is this: women make dresses for themselves and for other women . . . a man makes clothes for the woman he wants to be with, or in most cases, the woman he wants to be." This not-so-innocent comment, situating fashion on the gender battleground, inadvertently provides the key to the entire film.

These divergent—and possibly antagonistic—attitudes about fashion and its relation to women are played out on the body of supermodel Albertine (Ute Lemper). On the eve of the biggest show in Paris, she shows up pregnant. Albertine can't fit into the clothes earmarked for her, but on a deeper level, she now presents an image of womanhood totally unfit for the runway. Simone, however, is the only one who adjusts quickly and calls her pregnancy "wonderful"; someone like Cy Bianco (Forest Whitaker) thoughtlessly explodes at her because she's ruining his show. Albertine calls him "woman-hater."

Albertine's bursting belly raises two interesting questions which are at the crux of the movie: "What is the essence of womanhood?" and "Who's the father?" The first question is implicit in women's fashion. But

clothing intended to enhance womanhood is usually in the service of some idea of "beauty," and the clothes may actually conceal, alter, or exaggerate the true woman underneath them. Women become fashion victims: they are trapped in an image of themselves that's not quite true, an image generated by male fantasy and anxiety over female sexuality. As Cher, who plays herself in the movie, says, "Fashion is about women trying to be beautiful, but none of us is going to look like Naomi Campbell . . . so in a way I think it's kind of sad . . . I'm a victim as well as a perpetrator." Albertine's pregnancy brazenly confronts and complicates the issue, as framed by the high fashion industry, and will ultimately be taken up in the final *défilé*.

The second question is, of course, the fundamental issue of paternity. When Jack Lowenthal asks Albertine, "Who's the lucky man?" she blithely answers, "Well, maybe it's you, darling." It sounds tongue-in-cheek, but the charge is a distinct possibility; Jack is a notorious philanderer (he's cheating with his own wife's sister). In fact, Altman creates an atmosphere of uncertain paternity: Jack doesn't even know who his own father is.

Altman's world is peopled with fatherless children and abandoned wives/mothers. The masculine penchant to flee the situation may be the basis of the warfare Altman sees being waged between the sexes not only in this film but in others as well (*Images*, *3 Women*, *Short Cuts*). We eventually learn that Sergei abandoned Isabella on their wedding night to leave for Moscow.

"We were Communists," he says.

"*You* were a Communist," responds Isabella, "I was only fourteen."

Communism wasn't what it was cracked up to be, and Sergei ended up living in fear and poverty, making uniforms for Soviet officials. After Communism went out of fashion—Altman cleverly hints at the fad quality of political ideologies—Sergei tries to regain his lost youth. In trying to recapture their youthful passion, Isabella plays a sensuous Salome to Sergei's faltering Faust (in fact, "Salome" and "Faust" are the names of mirror hotel suites in the film). Isabella reveals a body that's scandalously well preserved—she's the spitting image of ageless Eternal Feminine—and does a tantalizing striptease only to discover that her first husband has fallen asleep. (This magnificent scene is ingeniously reproduced from a film Loren and Mastroianni made together over 30 years ago, *Yesterday Today and Tomorrow*.) She leaves a note on his chest: "Two husbands, two corpses."

Twice abandoned, twice betrayed.

Which brings us back again to the main story line. Simone Lowenthal, like Isabella, was probably abandoned in some way too—that's why her son has no father. Betrayal rears its ugly head again, in the form of another male close to home. Jack, without the approval of his mother, sells his mother's logo ("Lo") to a Texan manufacturer of cowboy boots, Clint Lammeraux (Lyle Lovett).

"You know, you're worse than your father," says Simone.

"Whoever that was," replies Jack.

"You sell and buy everything," Simone responds, "even your own mother."

In spite of Simone's protest, Jack sabotages his mother even further. Behind her back, he arranges a photo session featuring the boots. Imprinted prominently and gaudily with the "Lo" logo, these boots eclipse Simone's spring collection ("These Boots Are Made for Walkin'" plays on the sound track). Simone has been stepped on, not only as an artist but also as a woman (since her art celebrated the female body). She is powerless.

Or is she?

By sending her models down the runway totally nude, Simone is revolting. She is making an explosive statement, not only in defiance of her traitorous son, but also, symbolically, against the entire male order. To pull off such a coup, the solidarity of her models is necessary. Preceding Simone's final showdown, a confluence of new feminine alliances is forged in different corners of the movie but indirectly connected to Simone's plight. For instance, the three fashion editors, who have been fierce competitors throughout the film, eventually join forces against star photographer Milo O'Brannigan (Stephen Rea). Throughout the film, he has humiliated these women by taking photos of them in compromising positions with a spy camera. They gain the upper hand after seizing his negatives, which include, not insignificantly, the treacherous boot shoot. At the same time, Jack's power starts to wane when his estranged wife and her sister, with whom he had been cheating, reunite against him. They call him a rat to his face.

Accompanied by the haunting song "You Are So Pretty the Way You Are," Simone's models take the runway. This defiant *défilé* doesn't end up defiling the female body with eroticization or desexualization. Rather, Simone presents Mother Nature's getup: the naked female body. This anticlimactic gesture might be considered ridiculous, even mildly pornographic, if it weren't for the presence of Simone's daring center-

piece, her pièce de résistance: Albertine's pregnant body, an impregnable fortress. Formerly banned form the runway, Albertine now rules it as a nude queen-bride, a fabulous figure right out of Botticelli's *Primavera*. Literally bursting with life, Albertine represents the feminine essence. With her, Simone unveils the primal beauty, power, and mystery of the female body: its ability to bear life—which all the (male-dominated) fashion in the world can't contain or control. Simone liberates the female body from fashion fascism, the mechanism which dictates, regulates, and disseminates images of women. (Altman laces his film with subtle and subliminal references to the Holocaust.)

Marcello Mastroianni and Sophia Loren in *Ready to Wear*

The effect of Simone's *défilé* is not shocking. It's sublime.

Simone goes beyond making a feminist statement: the Eternal Feminine (think again of Sophia Loren's vibrant 60-year-old body), the origins of the species, the very beginnings of culture are put on display. As the new announcer of FAD-TV says, "Simone has spoken to women the world over, telling them not what to wear, but how to think about what they want and need from fashion."

(Altman creates an intriguing cross-reference by crosscutting a crossdressers' ball across town. As Simone's women undress, these men dress up. This juxtaposition visualizes metaphorically what Altman feels is really going on in fashion: men are not really making clothes for "real" women but for themselves. Or, to paraphrase Jack, they make clothes for the "ideal" woman they want to be with or the woman they want to be. A gigantic ice sea horse sits in the middle of the transvestites' banquet table. Why a sea horse? It's the only example in nature in which the *male* carries the fertilized eggs, a fact which underlines the central mystery of gender. In the case of men, no amount of dressing up as a woman makes a woman.)

Ready to Wear is mythic narrative in the guise of satiric spoof. What Altman envisions here is women's revolt, a *Trojan Women* for postmodern times. Less interested in high fashion than in why humans, who are born naked, cover their bodies in the first place, Altman provides us with a menu of the uses of fashion—in concealing, revealing, or fabricating identity (ethnic, class, occupational, ideological, sexual, gender). And as one designer says, "Fashion is about

looking good . . . it's about getting a great fuck." Therein lies the paradox: we dress up in order to undress (for sex). Joe Flynn (Tim Robbins) and Anne Eisenhower (Julia Roberts) certainly have no use for fashion: they spend the entire time under bed sheets.

In revealing the ironies and absurdities that result from the age-old conflict between culture and nature, *Ready to Wear* resembles *A Wedding* more than *Nashville*. Here, the omnipotence of nature asserts itself in two areas: sex and death. In *A Wedding*, Altman shows how a socially constructed ritual comes apart at the seams when realities which run counter to the order-defining myths associated with marriage constantly intrude on the party (infidelity, homosexuality, interracial desire, etc.). In *Ready to Wear*, it's also the body's desires and function which are at odds with the aims of high fashion.

Death frames both films. In *A Wedding*, it's the controlling family matriarch played by Lillian Gish; in *Ready to Wear*, it's the head of the Fashion Council. In both cases, death is presented as an embarrassment, an inconvenience, an obscenity, a reality that's not dealt with, ignored. That's the way of human culture. But the show goes on.

In the face of chaotic Eros and dead-end Thanatos, what the hell does fashion amount to anyway? This is a question Altman keeps on posing as he exposes the color-blind phonies, the glamour hounds, and the trend-trotting ignoramuses who dominate that world. Everyone has a fake name, nobody wants to be who they are, nobody knows who they are. Altman's world of fashion is ultimately as drab and unfab as what Cher (of all people) says: "It's not what you put on your body, but who you are inside."

In the last scene of *Ready to Wear*, Altman comes full circle and creates an ironic picture of the human life cycle. Seven naked newborns playing in the grass fill the screen. The camera pulls back to reveal that the toddlers are being photographed for a fashion ad. The campaign appears to be ripping off Simone Lo's "naked look." The slogan: "Get Real." As the fashion shoot takes place, Olivier de la Fontaine's funeral procession goes by. Isabella does not wear traditional black, but bright red. Perhaps this funeral is a cause for celebration: her liberation.

While Isabella may be making a fashion statement, Altman is not. Less about fab fabric than the tenuous fabric of society, *Ready to Wear* is an elaborate striptease of the human condition.

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Annual Film Quarterly

Book Roundup, Part I

Acting Male

Masculinities in the Films of James Stewart, Jack Nicholson and Clint Eastwood

By Dennis Bingham. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1994. $45.00 cloth; $15.95 paper.

In *Acting Male,* Dennis Bingham examines the performances of James Stewart, Jack Nicholson, and Clint Eastwood as they construct images of masculinity. The study bases its approach on psychoanalytic feminism blended with a treatment of stars and acting associated with Richard Dyer and James Naremore.

James Stewart's persona is characterized as "bisexual," not in the colloquial sense of entertaining sexual relations with men and women, but rather in a qualified sense of blending gender traits understood in the culture as typical, but distinct. So in the comic Western *Destry Rides Again*, Stewart portrays a lawman who does not carry a gun and brings to the frontier the civilizing values associated with women—as he will later in a more serious vein in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance.* What Bingham describes as "gender ambiguity" takes on a more psychological and openly conflicted form in *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Anatomy of a Murder*, the Anthony Mann Westerns, or Hitchcock thrillers such as *Vertigo.* Stewart's mixture of male determination and forcefulness blends with a feminine vulnerability and passion which, the author argues, call into question the prevailing standard of masculinity.

Jack Nicholson's craft is allied to Brechtian technique and the counterculture values of the 1960s. Beginning with *Easy Rider*, and developing through *Five Easy Pieces*, *The Last Detail*, *Chinatown*, and *The Shining*, Bingham finds in Nicholson the ability to crystallize male bravado while incorporating "an alienation effect" to criticize its fundamental values and expose its self-destructive posturing. However, Bingham claims that Nicholson's challenge to masculinity has been tamed in the 1980s, so that the star has reassured "the dominant order" in *Terms of Endearment* or succumbed to self-parody in *Batman.* Bingham contrasts the "silencing" of Nicholson with the challenge to masculinity offered by Stewart or the self-criticism expressed in the films of Clint Eastwood.

Eastwood is the action hero of the trio and, as such, an embodiment of "masculinism" that makes his subsequent critique all the more noteworthy. Bingham sketches the star persona developed in the violent, amoral cynicism of the "Man with No Name" Westerns and the anti-Establishment, Magnum-toting cop, Dirty Harry. These masculine types are reexamined and disavowed in *Tightrope*, *Unforgiven, The Beguiled*, and *White Hunter, Black Heart.* While cultivating the aura of a grandiose masculinity, Eastwood has played upon the ethos in an understated style, shifting between sympathy and doubt, moving from affirmation to confession.

Bingham is at his best when he closely examines the films under consideration and peppers careful description with judicious insights. His treatment of politics and race in the "Dirty Harry" films is particularly sensitive and illuminating. Unfortunately the author's enthusiastic engagement with the films is often hampered by the methods directing his study.

The rhetoric of psychoanalytic feminism at times smothers the work and cuts it off from an audience not already committed to its discursive model. I doubt that many readers, even fans of Stewart, Nicholson, and Eastwood, will make much progress into this book unless they are already well tutored in concepts such as "the gaze," "voyeurism," or "male hysteria," and persuaded of the efficacy of this critical approach. Bingham depends upon authorities such as Laura Mulvey, Kaja Silverman, and Tania Modleski to establish the basis for his practice, rather than persuasively introducing the reader to his method. This is not to say that the tools of psychoanalysis are not useful, particularly in analyzing precise narrative details and effects, but the text regularly veers into generalizations whose radical sympathies cloud its judgment.

Bingham's treatment of masculinity, the central issue of the study, illustrates the problem. "Masculinism" is introduced as a concept which expresses the flaws besetting men under patriarchy. Though one is led to assume that these traits range from an irredeemable brutishness to being the strong, virtuous man of action, the text never grounds its concept of masculinism in a historically evolving model. Nevertheless, Bingham proceeds to gauge the achievement of his stars in terms of their critique of this vague, monolithic standard, "the all-or-nothing dualism with which patriarchy sees the opposition of masculinity and femininity."

I would argue against such a dualism and for multiple and flexible standards of masculinity that vary according to class, region, historical period, or, more to the point, film genre. For example, masculine models typical of the musical or romantic comedy are distinct from the cowboy or the gangster. Fred Astaire or Cary Grant present a different ideal from John Wayne or Clark Gable. It comes as little surprise that James Stewart, a star associated with romantic comedies such as *The Philadelphia Story* and *The Shop Around the Corner*, would exhibit feminine qualities, because successful romantic union is often based on a mingling of gender traits between the couple. Whereas women in Hawks comedies tend to be more masculine, men in Lubitsch's films tend to be more feminine. In both cases these shared traits, no longer restricted to gender types, are a sign of maturity and prepare the couple for union. These variations are not a challenge to the culture—in fact, the culture encourages flexibility in gender roles as one means of promoting marriage. This is not to dismiss Stewart's move from educated, middle-class urban characters to Mann's cowboys. This switch speaks eloquently of Stewart's complexity and is worthy of analysis, but Bingham exaggerates the rigidity of the masculine standard in order to make Stewart appear not simply versatile and provocative but subversive.

Bingham offers some cogent observations on performance, such as Stewart's turn from a high-pitched hesitancy to a low, even, and occasionally rasping vocal delivery in the Mann Westerns. But the study never raises the question of how each performer prepares for a role or the working relationship between actor and director. Rather, Bingham simply assumes that the actor is the principal creative force shaping the performance. I believe a case can be made for the actor, but it has to be examined rather than assumed, especially with a filmmaker like Hitchcock, who is famous for belittling the contribution of his performers. This seems a significant omission in light of Nicholson's and Eastwood's work as both actors and directors. If these performers exercise the sort of control Bingham assumes, why have they taken on the responsibility of directing? How has this experience influenced their work on both sides of the camera? Bingham never distinguishes between films directed by these stars and other works. If *Tightrope* is such a central film for Eastwood, why did he turn the direction over to Richard Tuggle, a man with whom he never worked as director before or after? If Nicholson embraces a Brechtian approach to his craft, how does it influence his direction of *Goin' South*, *The Two Jakes*, or *Drive, He Said*? Bingham's principal research (and the strength of his book) is his examination of the films, but his work could have gained valuable perspective from further research into the production relations and the application of a more flexible understanding of masculinity.

LEGER GRINDON

■ Leger Grindon is Assistant Professor of Film Studies at Middlebury College.

Audio-Vision

Sound on Screen

By Michel Chion. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994. $55.00 cloth; $17.50 paper.

Of all the elements of film technique, sound design works on the most subliminal level. Audiences

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Of all the elements of film technique, sound design works on the most subliminal level. Audiences

consciously notice, and applaud, an exquisite production design or the dynamics of a thrilling acting performance. The orchestration of light and color, even image editing— a striking visual juxtaposition—may be recalled by viewers long after many narrative details are forgotten. But sound is invisible and is deployed by film-makers in support of the image track, and, while viewers might notice an especially aggressive image edit, sound splices are inaudible. As Michel Chion points out in his latest volume analyzing film audio, sound is mental, while images can be touched.

Chion, a composer, film-maker, and critic for *Cahiers du Cinéma*, has written three previous books on film sound, but this one is the first to be translated into English (kudos to Claudia Gorbman for an excellent, extremely readable translation). While Chion's analyses have several significant weaknesses, his work also boasts considerable strengths, especially since he has looked closely at the complexities of audiovisual correspondence, which is an area that much film criticism has tended to ignore. In recognition and appreciation of Chion's efforts, sound designer Walter Murch (whose brilliant work on *Apocalypse Now* led to the creation of the title "Sound Design") has written a poetic foreword to the volume.

Chion's book is divided into two sections. In the first, he examines "the audiovisual contract," the mutual influences that prevail between image and sound, as visual information influences auditory perception and audio information points toward and attaches itself to particular areas and objects in the frame. The book's second section applies the principles of analysis developed in the first part to such media forms as rock video, video art, and television, considers the impact of multi-track sound recording upon image editing, and concludes with an extended audiovisual analysis of the prologue to Bergman's *Persona*.

Chion is especially good when discussing his central focus—the ways that the addition of sound affects a viewer's perception and understanding of an image. Chion points out how sound attaches itself to the image, auditorily imposing a sensory organization upon the frame, but one that, paradoxically, seems to emanate from the image itself. Sounds can call attention to, and emphasize, particular objects within the frame in a way that defines them auditorily but which seems, nevertheless, to issue from and be motivated by the image. The viewer's tendency to process sounds visually, to define them in relation to the image track, even when it is the image track that is being defined by sound, is one of several aesthetic and perceptual paradoxes that Chion emphasizes. Though Chion doesn't mention it, Murch's extraordinary matching of a helicopter sound with the image of a spinning ceiling fan in *Apocalypse Now* is an especially powerful example of the way sound can define an image while being, for the viewer, referenced by that image.

A major portion of Chion's analysis is given to the differing perceptual fields constructed by image and sound. Chion maintains that images spatialize sound and sound temporalizes images. While he tends to minimize the important spatial information that sound can convey, he correctly stresses the importance of sound in providing temporal organization and direction to images that may otherwise lack these features. Sound helps establish continuity in films by imposing a temporal dynamic upon images in a way that vectorizes them, gives them a directional force and orientation.

An example he might have cited but didn't when discussing how sound vectorizes images is the shot of Jack Palance dismounting in *Shane*. Director George Stevens, realizing that a man getting off a horse looks more graceful than getting on, played the shot in reverse when he needed to show Palance climbing back in the saddle. The ambient noises on the sound track—the gurgling of a stream, the sound of the wind—and dialogue spoken by other characters in the scene vectorized the temporal dimension of the reversed shot so that it seems to move forward, not backward.

While exploring the different perceptual fields established by image and sound, Chion suggests that some of this perceptual information is transsensory, that the eye can discern audio information and the ear can discern visual information. In support of this, he points out that many silent films express sounds through image composition and editing that are more perfect than sound itself could be. However, while silent films like *Sunrise* might express the *idea* of particular, highly specific sounds that the images denote, this visual pointing-to is different from true audition, and Chion tends to minimize this difference in the interest of elaborating on transsensory perception.

What would help his discussion on this point is some empirical evidence from research on vision and audition. Like much film theory, however, Chion's work is content to remain at a level of speculation and assertion. While his ideas are sometimes forceful and may strike the reader as correct, the range of supporting evidence could be much broader and extensive. His claim that the ear has greater temporal acuity than the eye, for example, is a quantifiable assertion and should be supported with a citation to relevant research.

Much of the evidence offered in support of his ideas is culled from specific films, but, here, too, the number of titles cited is fairly small, and some important omissions are evident. Through all the discussion of multi-track recording neither Robert Altman nor his pioneering films are mentioned. Ironically, in a book about sound,

Chion's discussion refers to films by director and almost never mentions the relevant sound personnel by name.

An additional limitation might be mentioned: Chion's book is not a comprehensive treatise. His writing tends to be poetic and episodic, with a concept developed in a few paragraphs, at which point the discussion shifts to another topic. Readers looking for a systematic and expansive argument should be aware of the book's fragmented and aphoristic structure.

Despite these limitations, Chion's work has much to recommend it. He has grasped important principles of audiovisual correspondence that film criticism and theory have traditionally neglected, and he forces one to think anew about the way meaning is referenced in cinema. In spite of its sometimes overly poetic and metaphoric terms of analysis, Chion's work helps establish some important foundations for the analysis of sound in cinema and it is a welcome addition to scholarship in this area.

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Black American Cinema

Edited by Manthia Diawara. New York: Routledge, 1993. $55.00 cloth; $15.95 paper.

Black American cinema raises some complex methodological and theoretical questions for film studies. Is there a way to theorize black spectatorship? Which tenets of contemporary film theory should it extend; which should it discard? Do the films of Oscar Micheaux, Spike Lee, and Julie Dash embody a black aesthetic, a genuine alternative to Hollywood film-making? If so, on what grounds can it be proven? One of the many virtues of Manthia Diawara's recent anthology is that most of the contributors, some of them heavy hitters in black film and cultural criticism, do not shy away from such issues. In fact, one would be hard-pressed to find a better cross section of contemporary African-American film scholarship.

A spirit of vigorous dialectical debate informs the volume. Many of the essay in the section entitled "Black Spectatorship" challenge and/or expand the models of subjectivity and spectatorship established by psychoanalysis and feminism. One of Diawara's essays extends the terms of Laura Mulvey's analysis to argue "that the dominant cinema situates Black characters primarily for the pleasure of White spectators (male or female)." As Diawara persuasively points out, films with deracinated heroes in a white world—Eddie Murphy in *48 Hours* and *Beverly Hills Cop*—or black characters who "play by the rules" but "lose"—as with Captain Davenport (Howard Rollins) in *A Soldier's Story*—offer no opportunities for viewer identification, only resistance.

bell hooks disagrees with Diawara, suggesting that while black male spectators could identify with "an imaginative space of phallocentric power that mediated racial negation," it is black women who have been ignored most, by feminist film criticism as much as by mainstream cinema. Drawing on the transgressive status of black looks at whites in bigoted society, hooks suggests that "critical Black female spectators construct a theory of looking relations where cinematic visual delight is the pleasure of interrogation." "Alternative texts," such as Julie Dash's *Illusions,* embody this critical gaze in dramatizing the possibility that male vision is faulty (in the men's failure to perceive the studio executive's blackness) and in offering black female spectators "new transgressive possibilities for the formulation of identity." Michele Wallace similarly stresses the significance of gender as well as race in black spectatorship, noting that in 1940s films, black women were in the background (Butterfly McQueen's housekeeper in *Mildred Pierce*) or disconnected from central issues in social-problem movies dealing with race (*Lost Boundaries*, *Home of the Brave*).

Jacquie Jones extends Diawara's arguments by showing how Hollywood films never show black male characters in intimate sexual contact with women; instead, the likes of Eddie Murphy's "sex machine" in *48 Hours* preserve a "violent separateness" from women. Likewise, the stark contrast between Sean Penn's demure, softly lit lovemaking scenes and the "noisy" and nude representation of sex between a black suspect and his girlfriend in *Colors* bolsters her point. Jones circumspectly points out how examples of black independent cinema (Charles Burnett's *Killer of Sheep*, Marlon Riggs' *Tongues Untied*) allow for "the normalization of the Black character by valuing sexuality and rooting it in humanism."

In an equally stimulating vein, many of the articles in the section on Black Aesthetics tackle thorny issues of representation and realism. As elsewhere, Clyde Taylor here takes a radical position: he proposes dispensing with aesthetics entirely (as inherently unfair to black artists) and substituting the rhetorical trope of irony. Taylor analyzes the political context within which Hollywood undertook a domesticating adaptation of Charles Fuller's *A Soldier's Play* into *A Soldier's Story*. Taylor emphasizes how Captain Davenport, the film's embodi-

Chion's discussion refers to films by director and almost never mentions the relevant sound personnel by name.

An additional limitation might be mentioned: Chion's book is not a comprehensive treatise. His writing tends to be poetic and episodic, with a concept developed in a few paragraphs, at which point the discussion shifts to another topic. Readers looking for a systematic and expansive argument should be aware of the book's fragmented and aphoristic structure.

Despite these limitations, Chion's work has much to recommend it. He has grasped important principles of audiovisual correspondence that film criticism and theory have traditionally neglected, and he forces one to think anew about the way meaning is referenced in cinema. In spite of its sometimes overly poetic and metaphoric terms of analysis, Chion's work helps establish some important foundations for the analysis of sound in cinema and it is a welcome addition to scholarship in this area.

STEPHEN PRINCE

■ Stephen Prince teaches at Virginia Tech and is the Book Review Editor of *Film Quarterly*.

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ment of affirmative action, impersonates the work's Aesopian ethos of irony (expression that is meaningful to the white majority but which speaks to the black minority as well) as a black character in a position of authority whose political outlook is circumscribed and less attractive than the rebel's. Jacqueline Bobo works in a similar vein; her close analysis of Steven Spielberg's *The Color Purple* shows how the director inverted and reversed Alice Walker's emphasis on the oppression and liberation of her heroines Celie and Shug Avery to substitute a Dickensian sentimentalizing of their suffering that also emphasizes the humanizing of Mister.

Other authors are less ready to dispense with aesthetics as such. Drawing on literary and cultural analysis that posits the representation of circularity and immobility as characteristic of black literature, Richard Dyer contends that musical numbers in black musicals such as *Car Wash* or even in nonmusical films like *House Party* do not signal the possibility of characters changing their lives as they do in the narratives of white musicals; the characters remain pretty much the same at the end of the film as at the beginning. "It's not a question of transforming ordinary life into a utopia, the longing behind White musicals, but of showing life as an ongoing matter of making and creating."

The trio of essays on Oscar Micheaux by Jane Gaines, J. Ronald Green, and Thomas Cripps are of particular interest as attempts to situate the pioneering director in terms of a black aesthetic. Gaines' piece, an extension of her superb work on black silent melodrama, closely analyzes *Within Our Gates* and reflects further on the place of crosscutting and the film's formal discontinuities within its melodramatic scheme. She suggests that critics treat Micheaux's disjunctive style not as an expression of black essentialism or as an avant-garde practice, but as "... modifications produced by an independent who had nothing at stake in strict adherence to Hollywood grammar" and who produced the cinematic equivalent of black usage of English.

J. Ronald Green also offers some productive analogies between Micheaux's style and Hollywood cinema on the one hand, and African-American music and art and Eurocentric classicism on the other; he even tentatively suggests that Micheaux's film style is pre-classical. Green's general aim is to situate Micheaux's work in relation to DuBois's notion of "twoness" in African-American consciousness. He sees the contrast in *The Girl from Chicago* between the glossy production values of a decadent Harlem nightclub performance and the rougher musicale around a boarding-house piano in the South as evidence of Micheaux's struggle with production values and the dangers of assimilation.

Unfortunately, Green mounts this argument in the context of a full frontal assault on Thomas Cripps's aesthetic evaluation of Micheaux in the seminal *Slow Fade to Black*, finding that Cripps never offers criteria for assessing successful independent film practice apart from the ideal of black assimilation in Hollywood. Green has a point, but he makes his case in such a belabored fashion (going so far as to parody one of Cripps' paragraphs), at such length, with so little generosity of spirit—and no acknowledgment of the difficulties scholars in the 1970s faced in seeing Micheaux films, let alone critiquing them—that I missed more active editorial guidance from Diawara. And Green's own analysis of *The Girl from Chicago* is full of convoluted rationales (Farm Security Administration photos provide a standard for grainy realism; Benny Carter's occasionally tinny and ill-tuned instruments justify indistinct sound recording; and "good faith" and "integrity" of characters are expressed in to-camera address) which hardly add up to an exemplary critical method. In reply, Cripps seeks to recreate the context in which *Slow Fade to Black*, as well as Daniel Leab's and Donald Bogle's pioneering works, first appeared; in doing so, he displays a far more sophisticated sense of historiographic method.

The same kind of issues emerge, more reasonably and productively, from Diawara's juxtaposition of Amiri Baraka's and Houston Baker's distinctly opposed assessments of Spike Lee's films. Baraka dismisses them as the constructs of reactionary buppyism, the expression of a "retrograde trend" after the 1960s that dabbles in clichés and caricature. But Baker argues that Lee's middle-class consciousness (what Baraka sees as Lee's shortcoming) is precisely one of his strengths, and that Lee's work dramatizes how black desire—as embodied, for example, in the three possessive suitors in *She's Gotta Have It*, and in Radio Raheem and the other soldiers in the conflict of black and white styles in *Do the Right Thing*—is regulated by white economies.

There are many other pleasures that this collection affords. There are close analyses of exemplary or symptomatic works: Toni Cade Bambara's insightful discussion of Julie Dash's multilayered Afro-centrism in *Daughters of the Dust*; Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s analysis of the reflexive strategies at work in Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston* (1989); and Ed Guerrero's illuminating view of the generic convention of black characters in the custody of white "buddies" in films such as *48 Hours*. There are also expository presentations of historical episodes in black film culture: Phyllis Klotman's interesting account of Harlem Renaissance writer Wallace Thurman's brief sojourn in the 1930s as a screenwriter for Warner Bros. B-movie meister Bryan Foy; Ntongela Masilela's outline of the cultural context of the "L.A. School," highlighting the work of Haile Gerima and Charles Burnett (and their affinity for Third World cinema); and Dan Streible's heartening profile of the resil-

ient Black Harlem Theater in Austin, Texas, from 1920 to 1973.

Black American Cinema could have benefited from more thorough copy-editing (there are several misspelled and misdated film titles and personnel); one wishes that it, and other AFI Readers, had photographic illustrations. Readers will take issue with some of the individual essays. But *Black American Cinema* offers so many invigorating ideas about black aesthetics and black spectatorship that no one concerned with the theorization and representation of race and ethnicity can afford to ignore it.

MATTHEW BERNSTEIN

■ Matthew Bernstein is working on a study of black film culture in Atlanta.

The Ciné Goes to Town

French Cinema 1896–1914

By Richard Abel. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994. $55.00.

We have come to expect a great deal from film histories. Fortunately, Richard Abel's *The Ciné Goes to Town* offers us just the sort of history text that should satisfy nearly everyone. He relies on original archival archaeology and connects that inquiry to shifts in early French film style and culture, all the while keeping an eye on the theoretical implications of his own historiography. This book is a "prequel" to his *French Cinema: The First Wave, 1915–1929* (1984). As he promises in the preface, *The Ciné Goes to Town* continues that project and improves upon it in several areas.

While Abel's previous work accepted many assumptions about the earliest French films, *The Ciné Goes to Town* offers an "extensive excavation and reassessment" of French cinema between 1896 and 1914, giving special attention to 1904–11, when Pathé led the world in film production. Abel's structuring goal is "to reconstruct the emerging system of representation and narration which governed the production of early French fiction films." (xv) As such, his project offers a necessarily broad-based investigation of aesthetic traits, diverse cultural practices, and industrial forces.

This remarkably well-researched book is thoroughly documented, with 1,172 up-to-date endnotes; moreover, it cites 633 films. There is even a filmography listing all titles by year and producer, complete with their archival locations and lengths. *The Ciné Goes to Town* uses 130 illustrations, yet avoids the standard publicity stills found in so many histories. Abel and the editors also deserve praise for what must have been a herculean job of copy-editing. *The Ciné Goes to Town* is thus an exemplary history book. Abel helpfully verifies, corrects, or challenges earlier historians' information. The attention to detail, the importance of the scholarship, and the excellent production quality are evident at every level.

The Ciné Goes to Town begins with a very short chapter devoted to "Turn-of-the-Century France" before launching into its five major chapters. Abel claims, "This prologue sketches the economic, political, and cultural institutions and forces structuring Third Republic France at the turn of the century." (xviii) Yet this section is only seven and a half pages long. For a book that claims cinema is the "locus of social identity," there are more promises to explicate social connections than conclusions. So, while this section does touch on highly significant elements in French society, the lack of in-depth analysis of turn-of-the-century France may still frustrate those who want to see more about the relations between film and culture in Abel's work.

Chapter 2, "The French Cinema Industry, 1896–1914," provides an excellent overview of French film and begins to prove Abel's subplot, that Pathé's specific history determined the historical shifts in the industry as a whole. This chapter offers a comprehensive survey of economic developments and argues that film's drive toward cultural legitimacy served the industry legally, economically, and aesthetically. One of the most important figures for documenting and provoking vast changes in the French cinema's status, Abel proves, is Edmond Benoit-Lévy, editor of *Phono-Ciné-Gazette* and close ally of Pathé. Pathé's shift from fairgrounds to urban theaters and vertical integration is well documented and compelling. Abel also discusses producers who tried and often failed to adapt, compete, or secure a niche in this rapidly changing *spectacle de curiosité.*

With chapter 3, "The Cinema of Attractions, 1896–1904," Abel's book turns more specifically to the films. Here he describes the first of his four historical groups while he builds on work by Tom Gunning, André Gaudrault, Miriam Hansen, and Thomas Elsaesser in particular. This chapter addresses trick films, comedies, actualités, and historical reconstructions, and revels in their diversity and alterity. The section on Georges Méliès, however, needs more unity and focus. Here Abel's plot summaries are a bit uneven. He catalogues the trick films and *Féeries* but tacks on references to race/class/gender that occasionally seem forced. While Abel proves specific arguments about Méliès's patterns of story development and spatial arrangements, he is not always sure when to tie those concerns to issues of gen-

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Chapter 4, "The Transition to a Narrative Cinema, 1904–1907," chronicles the changes from actualités at Pathé and Gaumont to more fictional genres. Abel argues that this transitional period offers four "simultaneous, yet relatively distinct 'models' of transformation": bricolage, redundancy, alternation, and compound. While the four models are not equally functional, they do help Abel show that Pathé shifted to more standardized stories and styles of narrative continuity several years before Vitagraph and Biograph. He argues that some of these films also began to legitimize the French social order, making cinema a more overt ideological agent. The chapter's final third recounts numerous examples that prove repeatedly Pathé's new system of representation exceeded style as attractions. During this era, film style gradually functioned more consistently to create increasingly intricate and continuous narratives, including melodramas that were often ambiguous toward criminals and even aimed at a female audience. However, the certainty of a major break between the films of 1904–1907 and the next period seems clearer to Abel than it will to every reader.

By chapters 5, "The Pre-Feature, Single-Reel Story Film, 1907–1911," and 6, "The Rise of the Feature Film, 1911–1914," Abel's argument blossoms as he maps out changes in the industry, led by Pathé, and further growth of French film's narrative devices and genres. These two chapters comprise 250 pages of the book. Chapter 5 reveals ways in which French practice continued to rework yet also preserve existing story and style patterns; chapter 6 proves that new systems of representation had indeed been created by the early teens. Consistent attention to industrial changes, developing narrative tactics, distinct generic growth, and the arrival of new major figures, such as Louis Feuillade and Léonce Perret, help keep Abel's two large chapters unified and conclusive. He argues that too often historians have only looked to this era to uncover how France influenced America, but its significance goes much further. The comic series alone taught economy and efficiency while leveling "an unusually frank appraisal of the French social order," often presenting very modern representations of women.

The remarkable accomplishment of chapters 4, 5, and 6, beyond their very important historical conclusions, is that Abel remains genuinely intrigued by every film or fragment of a film he sees. And his enthusiasm for the era and its tiniest details keeps the reader devoted to the topic as well. Even the constant return of repetitive plot devices (dog chases, daughters in peril, drunken husbands . . .) never interferes with Abel's search for historical significance. For instance, when a Max Linder film is baldly formulaic, Abel diplomatically writes, "Although Linder's scenario for *Max pédicure* (1914) is hardly unfamiliar, this late film exhibits a highly nuanced sense of comic invention," (415) and he then proves it soundly. Moreover, he is eager to discuss both sophisticated comedies like Gaumont's "Léonce" series and extreme slapstick like *La Vie drôle,* whose "culturally determined humor" limited it to the domestic market. Abel not only worked hard in the archives, he also worked at writing a lively, teachable history that allows us to marvel at all these wonderful movies.

The Ciné Goes to Town proves elegantly that French cinema anticipated, overlapped with, and posed a distinct alternative to American film. Abel also pays constant attention to "how the representational strategies of particular film genres were mapped according to . . . French social relations or hierarchies of difference—class, gender, generation, race, and region." (429) Thus, Abel's history is a great success, although the average reader will also be sadly frustrated at perhaps never having the opportunity to see most of these films, much less teach them. Finally, therefore, *The Ciné Goes to Town* argues for more access to early films for teaching and research, so we can all share in the rich entertainment that Abel finds.

RICHARD NEUPERT

■ Richard Neupert teaches at the University of Georgia.

The Films of John Cassavetes

Pragmatism, Modernism, and the Movies

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with the present constitution and leanings of the film-studies community. Carney is, in some measure, responsible for the resurgence of interest in Cassavetes' work—if not in film studies, then in the filmgoing populace at large. He was involved in a 15-city tour of Cassavetes' films that took place during 1989 and 1990, as well as a retrospective of the film-maker's work in France in 1989. *The Films of John Cassavetes: Pragmatism, Modernism, and the Movies* is Carney's second book on the director.

As an unrepentant auteurist, Carney asserts that Cassavetes is "not only . . . one of the most important artists of the 20th century, but that the originality of his work was precisely what doomed it to critical misunderstanding." Carney writes in adamant opposition to what he sees as the cerebral high-modernism emerging from Pound and Eliot. He views Cassavetes, quite convincingly, as the progeny of William James, Emerson, John Dewey, and Whitman—antirationalist, experiential, nonidealized, embracing the senses, the body, and emotional involvement. Carney writes, "For Cassavetes, as for William James, truth is not an intellectual relation, but a course of action."

Carney's arguments are formulated through a *via negativa*. Cassavetes is seen in an adversarial relationship to what Carney calls the "visionary/symbolic film." By this he means films which foster fixed, detached, intellectual "ways of knowing." Carney writes, "The Hollywood Studio tradition, especially when it is functioning at its most 'artistic,' is devoted to using external actions, objects, events, and sounds to figure internal states of feeling and awareness." The viewer is denied emotional involvement with characters, who have an "essentially contemplative relationship and existence." The primary offenders are Alfred Hitchcock and Orson Welles. Also subject to Carney's vituperations are Scorsese (who credits Cassavetes as a major influence), Lynch, Altman, Malick, the Coens, and Kubrick, among many others. Carney claims to use these directors "only for the advantage of being able to cite works with which everyone is familiar," but one suspects, in light of the frequency and rancor with which these directors are invoked, that something more than mere opportunity is at issue. For Carney, these film-makers essentialize human behavior and the experience of art, and repudiate the richness and unpredictability of the sensory world. Cassavetes, on the other hand, "honors imaginative energies inevitably disruptive of the very forms of understanding and expression" advanced by the Hitchcock/Welles paradigm; clarity, explanation, and simplification are antithetical to Cassavetes' project. This Manichean view of film-making is reminiscent of the list-making of the writers for the 1950s *Cahiers du Cinéma*, who bifurcated directors into camps of good and evil.

Carney is wonderful in his observation and appreciation of the "sweaty," "in-your-face" involvement of Cassavetes' films. He is abetted in this by the empirical information he gained from personal contact not only with the director but also with his wife, Gena Rowlands, and his ensemble of associates—actors, crew members, and producers. Carney sees Cassavetes as a passionate witness, remaining outside his characters, not wanting to analyze or probe their subjectivity. He does this by rejecting point-of-view editing, and by refraining, as the writer of his own films, from following the story through either a first- or third-person narrator. Cassavetes' films are not plot-driven, but, as Carney says, "actor-centered," and moreover, they feature a style of acting that is concerned with process, rather than results. Other strategies that Carney cites as making Cassavetes' work unconventional are camera movements, jumpy editing, and shifts in tone that befuddle, rather than enlighten, the spectator. The understanding obtained by the viewer is partial and provisional; s/he is constantly forced to revise her expectations and hypotheses as knowledge is presented piecemeal. The spectator is "empowered as meaning-maker—sorting, organizing, exploring experiences." Clearly, Cassavetes is the American cousin of European "art cinema" directors such as Antonioni and Godard. While De Sica and Renoir are mentioned as precursors, it is curious that with the exception of a brief note, Carney fails to situate Cassavetes within a context of contemporaneous film-makers (other than American malefactors), claiming that they represent a too "meditative and intellectual" tradition.

Among this book's strengths are Carney's insightful reflections on acting. He discusses the multi-dimensional aspects of performance and holds forth compellingly on the social roles of the characters, performance as a revelation of an actor's life, and character as creator/actor/director of the world of the film. (Carney's treatment of Mabel Longhetti as creative artist in the chapter on *Woman Under the Influence* is particularly poignant.) The author also has excellent material on Cassavetes' work with actors and the techniques he uses to find and capture their most vital moments. Although character analysis was strictly verboten on Cassavetes' set, the director, as a working actor, still believed in creating a real partnership with his actors. Through endless retakes, and reshoots months after a project was completed, Cassavetes would work at getting what Carney terms "fluxions of feelings"—fluid moment-to-moment interaction that resulted in some of the most subtle and powerful performances in contemporary cinema.

Carney's ideas about performance include a superb passage on Method acting and its relation to melodrama and romanticism, discussing the "states of expressive disenfranchisement, social displacement, and imagina-

tive alienation" that are common to all three. Interesting as well is the gap Carney finds between the way a character expresses herself, and the limiting possibilities in the social world for that expression. Cassavetes joins artists like "Hawthorne, Poe, James, and Faulkner (in American literature), Sargent, Eakins, Homer, and Hopper (in American painting), and Capra, Loden, May, and Rappaport (in American film)" who explore "the vexed transactions between the imagination and the forms available to it. For each of them, turning feelings into expressions involves a problematic act of translation." They are artists who deal with this gap through "stylistic disturbance," a notion that perfectly describes Cassavetes' aesthetic.

Carney's position in this book becomes troublesome when he insists that "Thought is something we do when we're not living." It is a most unusual stance for a writer, scholar, and teacher to take, but the risk of highly polemicized writing like Carney's is that it can lead to such indefensible posturing. Even so, Carney's sometimes radical ways of expressing himself are part and parcel of the energy of this book.

CAROLE ZUCKER

■ Carole Zucker teaches at Concordia University in Montreal, and is the author of *Figures of Light: Actors and Directors Illuminate the Art of Film Acting*.

Framing Blackness

The African American Image in Film

By Ed Guerrero. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1993. $39.95 cloth; $16.95 paper.

Framing, in *Framing Blackness*, refers to the intellectual work done by Guerrero's book, and to the work done by black cinema, but also to the narrowing effects of the commercial imperative that characterized Hollywood's treatment of blackness, even during the periods when commercial cinema has thought it was honoring African Americans. The book's cover design shows Joe Morton, the lead actor in *The Brother from Another Planet*, framed by the letters and words comprising the title of the book; the half-tone, black-and-white processing of Morton's portrait and his electric hairstyle and wary, intelligent, and resolute facial expression suggest dynamism that is under siege but not contained by the graphic intentions of the framing letters.

Guerrero's study is charged with the same dynamics; it is a praxis-oriented analysis of black film. Like Mark Reid in his important book, *Redefining Black Film*, Guerrero has reviewed the whole history of the black film image in America. He has spent less time than Reid analyzing the early period of black film production epitomized by the careers of Oscar Micheaux and Spencer Williams, preferring instead to set up a dialectic between the original defining attitude of Hollywood toward African Americans and the efforts of the post–civil rights movement to create a black cinema. Guerrero's first chapter is called "From 'Birth' to Blaxploitation," and, though that title refers to the history of film between *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and Melvin Van Peebles' *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), it essentially skips over the early black independent movement of the 1920s and 1930s in order to focus on the more recent movements of blaxploitation in the 1970s, right-wing reaction and black responses to it in the 1980s, and the new black movie boom of the 1990s.

One element of Guerrero's central thesis is that the profit motive in Hollywood structurally relegates black cinema, along with other minority-audience cinemas, to marginal status. The highest production and distribution budgets are reserved for films that appeal to the broadest audience. When the cost of producing cinema rose around the time of *The Birth of a Nation*, it was structurally necessary to appeal not only to middle-class values but also to strict racial codes, (17) which at that time were openly white supremacist—Guerrero has shown that racism was economically beneficial for Hollywood. When production values rose to the level of sheer opulence, epitomized by *Gone with the Wind* (1939), the racism that was often part of the message was made palatable by the magnitude and charm of the plantation (or other wealthy) vision. (22) The most opulent films also seemed to erase all but the upper and the servant classes of society; in film after film there was no evidence of a middle class, an extraordinary fact, given the middle-class makeup of the audience. When blacks were included in such films as *Jezebel* (1938), they were represented as happier than lower-class whites, whom the blacks pointedly referred to as "po' white trash." (24) This erasure of the social arrangement of captured labor—in which indentured blacks who are part of an opulent vision are happier than free but poor whites who are left out of that vision—Guerrero has related to fascism; when fascism actually did arise and become officially the enemy in Europe, Hollywood's fascism began to look ugly. (27)

Throughout the book, Guerrero has treated glossy images, high production values, and seamless styles as a

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Throughout the book, Guerrero has treated glossy images, high production values, and seamless styles as a

problem for black cinema. Such standards have caused the budgetary "glass ceiling" that always relegated minority-related production to a lower budget than mainstream films, whose budgets soar above that glass ceiling to produce the most expensive styles possible. Both black and white producers have sometimes approached the problem of the glass ceiling by going for a crossover audience. Biracial buddy movies, for example, have broadened audiences and seem to be racially progressive; however, they tend to eradicate the black point of view, and their buddying seems to be to the purpose of solving white rather than black problems. (128–31) And the greatest recent crossover star, Eddie Murphy, often challenges racism, but not classism, (132) which, as the Hollywood megabudgets materially and repeatedly prove, is structurally racist in the United States. (Expensive cinema tends to reinforce whatever power imbalances define the social relations that produce the financial imbalance inherent in the term "expensive.")

Another element of Guerrero's central thesis is that black *independent* film is necessary—the blackness framed by Hollywood's overdetermined relationship with profit requires cinematic reframing by outsiders. (35) Independent films produced by university graduates such as Julie Dash, Haile Gerima, and Charles Burnett are laying political, philosophical, and aesthetic foundations that cannot be expected of Hollywood films. (137)

Guerrero has refused to polarize "independent" and "mainstream" cinemas, however; not only has he found them tangled together in reality, but he has found that both must face hard realities such as the paradox that black audiences need to have their reality portrayed yet also want to avoid that reality. (168) That paradox means that excellent and daring independent films like Charles Burnett's *To Sleep with Anger* and Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* will have trouble finding audiences. A related paradox can be seen in the desire of some black film-makers to achieve mastery of the film craft while still needing to deform that mastery (in terms suggested by Houston Baker, Jr.). If the mastery of Hollywood's craft by black film-makers means learning Hollywood linguistic conventions and thus addressing already colonized desires of black people and extending the crossover avenues farther into white audiences with their white problems, then black film-makers also need to produce avant-garde languages, socially more urgent messages, and insiders' depictions of the non-crossed-over black world. (180–81)

Guerrero's thesis concludes on a positive, but wary, note. After leveling respectful but honest criticism at the best of Spike Lee's films, including their slick production values, Guerrero has decided that the epic scale and budget of *Malcolm X* are, nonetheless, justified by the global scale and social import of Malcolm X's thinking. (203) Also, if Lee had not been able to film on expensive locations abroad, some of the reality and grandeur of Malcolm X's actual accomplishment would have been falsified. Guerrero feels that Lee has captured each register of Malcolm X's life, including the early down-and-out period, and that Malcolm's ideas have been made available more broadly than ever before. Guerrero's last two points, however, remain problematical according to his own cogent arguments based on high budgets and classism. They are open to the questions of (1) whether it is truly possible to reflect a down-and-out reality in a filthy-rich style, and what the political implications would be of supporting such a success if it were possible; and of (2) whether a message that has seemed to reach so many colonized minds can have much of Malcolm X's original import in it. Part of the message of Malcolm X's exemplary life is his avoidance of the temptations of money, class, and privilege (foundations of racism), none of which are avoided by the high style of Lee's film. Thus Guerrero, in claiming a special need for an expensive style in the portrayal of Malcolm X's accomplishment, is defending a misrepresentation of that accomplishment.

The remainder of Guerrero's brilliant conclusion is in two parts—an open-ended summary and a riddle. His summary states that black film has recently taken a great leap, but that leaps can be expected to be affected by gravity. With the boom on the upswing, it is a good time to be thinking not conservatively, which is the temptation, but of new variables, perspectives, and methods. For example, African Americans need to move sharply into the businesses of distribution and exhibition, which are monopolized by whites (Oscar Micheaux and others called for this in the 1920s). There are no black theater owners to demand the kind of film material needed in their communities. African Americans need to use video stores like bookstores. The video market encourages low-budget films, so black film-makers can produce more; that market also allows for more pluralistic treatment of black issues. But Guerrero has also pointed out that attention to the video market should not mean withdrawal from the big screen, which also needs attention. The big screen needs to see works by the great black authors, it needs the female leads that would be required to treat the works of those authors, and it needs the dramatic realism of those works.

To close, Guerrero presents a riddle that looks like a paradox but is not:

> Perhaps here it is best to conclude with the riddle so brilliantly posed in the opening of Bill Duke's powerful crime-action drama about passing, dissembling, and double consciousness, *Deep Cover* (1992). Applying for an un-

dercover assignment, a black cop (Larry Fishburne) is interviewed by a slimy Washington bureaucrat who, in order to test Fishburne's cool, asks him a Zen-like question, "What's the difference between a black man and a nigger?" The question is supposed to have no answer, or innumerable answers, as African Americans must confront or negotiate this question every day of their lives. Fishburne, his face a cool, dissembling mask, responds by saying in effect that a nigger is someone who would even try to answer such a question. In a referential parallel manner, then, this question highlights something at the heart of the African American cinematic challenges. All black filmmakers confront exactly this defining task. Fishburne, playing the masked trickster, answers appropriately to his situation in the movie, but black filmmakers are obligated to respond in their films in complex political and aesthetic ways. If they fail to do so, they surrender control over the production of the ideas, images, and narratives that so indelibly define the limits and possibilities of black life in America. Only by weighing the many possible answers that arise in the riddle-like social transactions of "race" can black filmmakers create authentic humanized images and narratives of black life. (207–08)

So Guerrero finally calls for more African-American influence over dominant cinema, as well as more unco-opted, liberated perspectives from cinemas outside the mainstream. In the course of pursuing his thesis, Guerrero has mounted some of the best interpretations of specific films in all of African-American film criticism. His interpretations of dozens of films are consistently characterized by incisiveness, relevance, uninsistent theoretic sophistication, jargonless readablility, pragmatic wisdom, tough and generous love, and unflagging originality and fresh insight.

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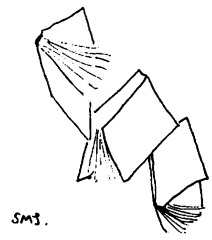

Just Watch!

Sternberg, Paramount, and America

By Peter Baxter. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press/BFI, 1994. $47.95 cloth; $19.95 paper.

This outstanding volume provides a close reading (historical, sociological, ideological, psychological) of Josef von Sternberg's *Blonde Venus*, situating it both in its time (America, 1932) and ours. Peter Baxter, already the editor of a fine anthology on the director, is concerned to note the way, in the making and reception of this one film, we are "plunged into that little-explored region where personal motives and social forces are so tightly skeined as to be hardly distinguishable from one another." (140)

To this end, Baxter organizes his book in concentric rings, with Depression America on the outside, Paramount studios the middle ring, and the competing psychologies of Sternberg and producer B. P. Schulberg dueling in the center. (Baxter unfortunately does not dwell on Marlene Dietrich, the film's star, as an organizing force of the film, although she had an uncredited role in co-authoring the film's original story, and of course dominates its iconography.) A great deal of new information is unearthed and usefully put to work: contemporary reviews and censor reports; the paintings and house Sternberg commissioned (seen as keys to his psyche and politics); and above all, the screenplay's several drafts. The tale of how that screenplay evolved is truly fascinating, as it whipsaws back and forth from a hard-edged version foregrounding the Depression to softer versions emphasizing hearth and home and, finally, to the ambiguous text we have before us.

To Baxter, the core of the film is a brief montage sequence three-quarters of the way through the film, which takes Helen from drunken slattern to the toast of Paris in a few seconds. He derives his book's title from Helen's boast ("Just watch!") at the beginning of the sequence, which is presented frame by frame and returned to again and again. Baxter skillfully allies this one short scene to Sternberg's recurring water imagery, to spectator theory, and centrally, to the film's key themes of ambiguous, ungraspable motivations, behaviors, and sudden transformations.

At times Baxter is too sure of himself in his confident assertions about the mental processes of Sternberg (perhaps he cast Gary Cooper in *Morocco* because a tall screenwriter had showed up his grammar), or Schulberg, or contemporary viewers, or America in 1932. Regarding the Lindbergh kidnapping, Baxter writes that "millions . . . imagined themselves in the place of the child."

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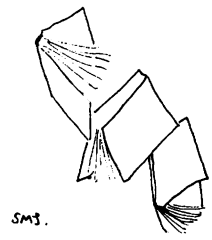

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(138) Maybe, and maybe not. But it is this willingness to take conceptual leaps in the dark that allows Baxter to make (to paraphrase *Blonde Venus*) "holes in the water" of the otherwise daunting, impenetrable enigma this director's work presents. In particular, Baxter's reading of the film's move from Helen swimming under the credits to her son reaching for a music box at the end of the film is a brilliant demonstration of how the (male) human body just might be "erotically mapped." "For the little boy the moment has arrived when he must irrevocably turn his attention outside the family for his fulfillment," writes Baxter; the music box represents the spectacle we will all "just watch." (168) We have in this a reading which harnesses psychoanalytic theory and filmic practice in a for once not fratricidal team.

In short, *Just Watch!* is a fine demonstration of just how, again to quote Baxter, "these three levels—the personal, the economic, and the social—cannot be dissociated, even if discerning their precise interaction is a task of daunting complexity." (157) Baxter meets that challenge and accomplishes that task, successfully bringing together in himself the separate tasks of historian and theorist. Film theory would in general be stronger if more attention was paid—as it is here—to the nuts and bolts of production, even as empirical film histories would be improved by theorization of Baxter's caliber. This book is a model for all future film study.

GREGG RICKMAN

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Laughing Screaming

Modern Hollywood Horror and Comedy

By William Paul. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993. $29.50 cloth; $16.50 paper.

Laughing Screaming is an ambitious book, a veritable poetics of gross-out. Combining close analysis of particular movies with broadly cultural criticism, William Paul moves across and between two expansive and well-populated modern Hollywood genres, horror and comedy, with sidelong glances at the Payne Fund Studies, "dead-baby" jokes, and the Book of Job. In so doing, he not only makes explicit claims (for, among other things, the value of *Revenge of the Nerds*, *The Brood*, and "resonant outrageousness") but he also implicitly challenges (basically by ignoring) the academic turn toward poststructuralism and postmodernism. Paul remains committed to interpretation, but only undertaken from a stance that is at once celebratory, aesthetically attuned, and ethical—and always delivered in user-friendly prose.

Pinning down "gross-out" as attitude and art form without sanitizing it looks like a tough task indeed, but Paul succeeds admirably. Gross-out, he argues, is about directness, vulgarity, festivity, playfulness, physicality, release, "aggressive uninhibitedness"; it is concerned with pushing the limits of what is acceptable, prizing "spectacle over meaning." It is a deeply ambivalent "art of inversion," which, as Paul convincingly reminds us, "does not necessarily point to subversion." (420) The new slapstick of "animal comedy" is the prime comic manifestation of gross-out in recent Hollywood film. Paul creates a history for this particular genre that proceeds as follows: *M*A*S*H* and *American Graffiti* are revisioned as *Cooley High* and *Car Wash*, then Animal Comedy emerges full-blown with *Animal House* and *Porky's*, finds its resident clown-prince in Bill Murray, and reaches its high point with *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, *Revenge of the Nerds*, and *Heaven Help Us*. Perhaps somewhat contradictorily, by the end of this excursion into the vulgar, Paul is left praising *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* because it endows its characters with "emotional complexity" and "psychological richness," and because it displays "sensitivity" to matters of social class and status.

The screaming side of things is for Paul best understood in terms of certain thematic concerns: the physicality of the "revolting" body, the problem of "female power," and the ambivalent disgust at and celebration of rebellion. The "central defining feature" of modern horror, however, is the transformation of the "child-as-victim" into the "child-as-monster." Thus the importance of *The Bad Seed*, *The Exorcist*, *Halloween*, *Carrie*, and *The Shining*. Paul's attentiveness to Kubrick's film is, as would probably be expected, well rewarded, yet why consider *The Shining* as a gross-out movie in the first place? *Laughing Screaming* opens with the challenging affirmation that "this is a book about movies that never won prestigious awards, movies that embraced the lowest common denominator as an aesthetic principle, movies that critics constantly griped about having to sit through." (3) In practice this turns out to be much truer of the specific comedies than of the horror movies he analyzes, and quite often it is the *uncommon* achievement that is revealed to be the object of his generic quest.

On this quest Paul doesn't pretend to offer comprehensive, encyclopedic coverage of gross-out, though a good number of films are mentioned, and he is more than willing to generalize about modern Hollywood horror

(138) Maybe, and maybe not. But it is this willingness to take conceptual leaps in the dark that allows Baxter to make (to paraphrase *Blonde Venus*) "holes in the water" of the otherwise daunting, impenetrable enigma this director's work presents. In particular, Baxter's reading of the film's move from Helen swimming under the credits to her son reaching for a music box at the end of the film is a brilliant demonstration of how the (male) human body just might be "erotically mapped." "For the little boy the moment has arrived when he must irrevocably turn his attention outside the family for his fulfillment," writes Baxter; the music box represents the spectacle we will all "just watch." (168) We have in this a reading which harnesses psychoanalytic theory and filmic practice in a for once not fratricidal team.

In short, *Just Watch!* is a fine demonstration of just how, again to quote Baxter, "these three levels—the personal, the economic, and the social—cannot be dissociated, even if discerning their precise interaction is a task of daunting complexity." (157) Baxter meets that challenge and accomplishes that task, successfully bringing together in himself the separate tasks of historian and theorist. Film theory would in general be stronger if more attention was paid—as it is here—to the nuts and bolts of production, even as empirical film histories would be improved by theorization of Baxter's caliber. This book is a model for all future film study.

GREGG RICKMAN

■ Gregg Rickman teaches at San Francisco State University.

Laughing Screaming

Modern Hollywood Horror and Comedy

By William Paul. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993. $29.50 cloth; $16.50 paper.

Laughing Screaming is an ambitious book, a veritable poetics of gross-out. Combining close analysis of particular movies with broadly cultural criticism, William Paul moves across and between two expansive and well-populated modern Hollywood genres, horror and comedy, with sidelong glances at the Payne Fund Studies, "dead-baby" jokes, and the Book of Job. In so doing, he not only makes explicit claims (for, among other things, the value of *Revenge of the Nerds*, *The Brood*, and "resonant outrageousness") but he also implicitly challenges (basically by ignoring) the academic turn toward poststructuralism and postmodernism. Paul remains committed to interpretation, but only undertaken from a stance that is at once celebratory, aesthetically attuned, and ethical—and always delivered in user-friendly prose.

Pinning down "gross-out" as attitude and art form without sanitizing it looks like a tough task indeed, but Paul succeeds admirably. Gross-out, he argues, is about directness, vulgarity, festivity, playfulness, physicality, release, "aggressive uninhibitedness"; it is concerned with pushing the limits of what is acceptable, prizing "spectacle over meaning." It is a deeply ambivalent "art of inversion," which, as Paul convincingly reminds us, "does not necessarily point to subversion." (420) The new slapstick of "animal comedy" is the prime comic manifestation of gross-out in recent Hollywood film. Paul creates a history for this particular genre that proceeds as follows: *M*A*S*H* and *American Graffiti* are revisioned as *Cooley High* and *Car Wash*, then Animal Comedy emerges full-blown with *Animal House* and *Porky's*, finds its resident clown-prince in Bill Murray, and reaches its high point with *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, *Revenge of the Nerds*, and *Heaven Help Us*. Perhaps somewhat contradictorily, by the end of this excursion into the vulgar, Paul is left praising *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* because it endows its characters with "emotional complexity" and "psychological richness," and because it displays "sensitivity" to matters of social class and status.

The screaming side of things is for Paul best understood in terms of certain thematic concerns: the physicality of the "revolting" body, the problem of "female power," and the ambivalent disgust at and celebration of rebellion. The "central defining feature" of modern horror, however, is the transformation of the "child-as-victim" into the "child-as-monster." Thus the importance of *The Bad Seed*, *The Exorcist*, *Halloween*, *Carrie*, and *The Shining*. Paul's attentiveness to Kubrick's film is, as would probably be expected, well rewarded, yet why consider *The Shining* as a gross-out movie in the first place? *Laughing Screaming* opens with the challenging affirmation that "this is a book about movies that never won prestigious awards, movies that embraced the lowest common denominator as an aesthetic principle, movies that critics constantly griped about having to sit through." (3) In practice this turns out to be much truer of the specific comedies than of the horror movies he analyzes, and quite often it is the *uncommon* achievement that is revealed to be the object of his generic quest.

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and comedy. One likely response to *Laughing Screaming* might be to ask something like: "What about Cheech and Chong movies, *The Cheerleaders*, *The Funhouse*, or *Re-Animator*?" Such queries may not be fair (after all, this book is already 510 pages long), but Paul does leave himself open to them, since he doesn't explain in much detail precisely why certain movies are included and other ignored. To his credit, most of the time I found myself thinking not of glaring omissions or counter-examples but of alternate instances that work in interesting ways within Paul's network of primary themes and motifs.

For all its insightful analysis of horror and comedy, there is no theorizing about genre in *Laughing Screaming*. Basically following Northrup Frye, Paul assumes without question that a genre can be defined by its "key features" and its "contradictions," that individual films can be engaged in a "dialogue with the genre," (71) and that contemporary comedy and horror have long, long genealogies, stretching back in an age-old "vulgar tradition." In fact, claiming this ancestry for gross-out of the 1970s to 1980s becomes more important for Paul than tracing in any detail the durability (if not the creative vitality) of this particular mode in the made-for-video and cable TV market, where *Hellraiser III* meets *The Bikini Carwash Company II*. Except for a convincing analysis of the initial marketing and reception of *The Exorcist*, Paul is likewise not interested in studying the history of gross-out from the perspective of the film industry—for example, how this genre came to have something fundamental to do with new conditions of production and distribution in the age of cable TV and video rentals. This omission is less a flaw than a rather clear indication of the salvaging operation going on in *Laughing Screaming*, which undertakes to identify certain high points in the genres at hand and reclaim a certain type of film criticism.

For one thing, this criticism is cultural rather than ideological, taking its lead, it seems, from public intellectuals like Garry Wills and Christopher Lasch rather than from cultural studies in the academy. Paul borrows much from Bakhtin and unapologetically relies on Freud, while often giving these "low" movies full credit for the acuity of their psychological perceptions as well as their festive, playful qualities.

Most of all, this type of criticism is attentive to detail, subtlety, and ambivalence in individual Hollywood films and to the emotional charge, the pleasures, and the ties that bind us to horror and comedy as we watch. Paul does not enter into the ongoing debate concerning gender and spectatorship, and he's got no sympathy for theories that privilege an oppositional audience that "excorporates" popular culture. He admits that he is "not forwarding definitive claims about what an audience thought and felt" (74) and that he is attempting to "define my experience of these films," (81) but his way of discussing film depends on drawing conclusions, often in precise and elaborate terms, about how "the viewer" responds to a given scene or entire movie. Being convinced by his argument depends in part on how much you are willing to accept this disclaimer and his viewer, which is to say, how much credit you are willing to give to his voice and his experience of, say, *Stripes* and *The Other*. I give *Laughing Screaming* considerable credit.

GREGORY A. WALLER

■ Gregory A. Waller teaches at the University of Kentucky.

The Merchant Prince of Poverty Row

Harry Cohn of Columbia Pictures

By Bernard F. Dick. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1993. $28.00.

Over a year ago I expressed in these pages my disappointment with Bernard F. Dick's anthology *Columbia Pictures* (1992). That volume failed to integrate studio history with critical analyses of films, and Dick himself paid slight attention to Columbia's achievements in the 1930s and 1940s.

With *The Merchant Prince of Poverty Row*, we learn that Dick was holding out on us. He has authored the first scholarly account of Harry Cohn's career, and he has rightly intertwined it with Columbia Pictures' rise to major studio status. Written in a lively style that pays attention to industry context as well as to personal idiosyncrasies, and more systematic than Bob Thomas's 1967 *King Cohn*, Dick's volume is the broadest and most insightful look at Cohn and Columbia we are likely to have for some time.

Dick has ferreted out the studio's internal history in the only way it can be done at present without the benefit of a studio archive: indirectly. He has examined the archival materials left by Columbia's sometime employees (Edward Small, Irene Dunne, Jerry Wald, George Stevens); a cache of teletypes between the Cohn brothers (the elder Jack ran distribution, advertising, and publicity in New York), now housed at the University of Wyoming; and the trade press (*Motion Picture News*,

and comedy. One likely response to *Laughing Screaming* might be to ask something like: "What about Cheech and Chong movies, *The Cheerleaders*, *The Funhouse*, or *Re-Animator*?" Such queries may not be fair (after all, this book is already 510 pages long), but Paul does leave himself open to them, since he doesn't explain in much detail precisely why certain movies are included and other ignored. To his credit, most of the time I found myself thinking not of glaring omissions or counter-examples but of alternate instances that work in interesting ways within Paul's network of primary themes and motifs.

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Motography) for the early years. For personal spice, Dick has interviewed a few surviving Columbia officials and talents.

Dick's insights into "White Fang"'s personality (and the book's title) take their cue from Clifford Odets' eulogy for Cohn and an observation from screenwriter Oscar Saul: "Harry Cohn acted like a mug, but he made movies like a merchant prince" (i.e., one of the Medicis). After gaining more recognition in Hollywood than his older brother in the late 1920s, Cohn saw himself as "American's greatest dramatist"—and as Dick shows, he was very closely involved in the scripting, shooting, editing, titling, and Production Code disputes of many Columbia films.

Cohn's "street-fighter facade" was in Dick's words "protective coloration," and as others have observed, Cohn respected talented employees who could complement his own skills. But Cohn, as the only studio president who was also head of production, was never comfortable sharing credit or power with either outside producers or in-house individuals (Sidney Buchman, Virginia Van Upp, and S. Sylvan Simon). Such insights come alive with several anecdotes and are sharpened when Dick contrasts Cohn with other studio heads, most notably M-G-M's Louis B. Mayer, the executive Cohn envied most.

Similarly, comparisons with other studios heighten Dick's construction of the industry context in which Cohn and Columbia competed. For example, Dick has found that the Cohns were extremely self-conscious in comparing themselves with Universal, Columbia's closest competitor, as well as their former employer. Since Columbia was formed just as vertical integration was getting underway, and because the studio took shape as a low-budget "independent," Dick notes some of the many obstacles facing independents in the 1920s.

Once Dick brings us into the 1930s, the book drops its chronological format for a series of chapters on different aspects of Cohn and his company. Dick provides an evocative picture of Cohn as a studio boss—what his fascist-inspired office looked like, how his working lunches were conducted, and how he negotiated firm contracts with contract players like Jean Arthur (and generously rewarded Capra, contrary to the latter's claims). Except for a few pages on the Bank of America, we get little sense of where and how Columbia got money to make films; however, Dick persuasively dismisses rumors that Cohn used mob money for the 1931 buyout of original partner Harry Brandt.

In his lengthiest chapter, Dick sets out one of the book's major claims: "Harry, who had the most diverse background of any of the moguls (pool hall hustler, trolley car conductor, nickelodeon performer, song plugger . . .), wanted movies that, like himself, were not easily categorized." According to Dick, Cohn embraced Capra's knack for creating a melting pot of genres and applied it to many of Columbia's non-Capra films—for instance, screwball romance and feminist sentiment (social consciousness) in *She Married Her Boss*. While this leads Dick to analyze in useful detail a number of minor Capra and lesser-known Columbia titles (*No More Orchids* [1932], *Virtue* [1932], *Cocktail Hour* [1933], and the big-budget 1934 Jean Arthur vehicle, *Whirlpool*), I do not find him convincing about the reasons for what he calls "CapraCohn." He neglects the "impurities" that existed in film genres (e.g., screwball comedies frequently posited greater equality between the sexes anyway); he downplays the extent to which all the studios and producers were *bricoleurs* who mixed and matched formulas for a larger market share in the thirties and forties. Archival evidence of Cohn's thinking along these lines might persuade me otherwise, but apparently there is none to adduce.

By contrast, the most satisfying section of the book is in chapter 9, where among other things, Dick provides some details on Cohn's contribution to *From Here to Eternity*, *All the King's Men* (demanding that Robert Rossen drop the confusing flashbacks and motivate characters clearly), and *Born Yesterday* (striving to preserve absolute fidelity to the stage hit).

The analogy between Cohn's varied careers and Columbia's genre-mixed films is the major instance of Dick's tendency to slippery analogies. At one point he suggests that Jack Cohn's expertise at Universal in the teens in editing and production economies in some way carried over to brother Harry. Dick's admirable attempt to characterize Cohn's mogul reputation as a type of myth leans heavily on the notion of mogul as deity, rather than on the more productive notion that Cohn, like any Hollywood star, projected a polysemous image in the industry.

Nonetheless, *The Merchant Prince of Poverty Row* is an admirable achievement. Well illustrated, and accompanied by an organizational chart of the studio in 1957 (and a transcript of Clifford Odets' eulogy for Cohn), at 200 pages it is not exhaustive. But Dick has added a great deal of detail to the profile of the studio in Douglas Gomery's *The Hollywood Studio System* and to the anecdotes Bob Thomas dutifully recorded almost 30 years ago. Hollywood historians and movie buffs will be using it as the standard history of Cohn and Columbia's studio-era heyday for many years to come.

MATTHEW BERNSTEIN

■ Matthew Bernstein is the author of *Walter Wanger, Hollywood Independent*.

Projections of War

Hollywood, American Culture and World War II

By Thomas Doherty. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993. $32.50.

World War II is no longer box office. Too old, too slow, and almost all of it in black and white; according to one TV company vice president for programming, "there's nothing real about it." In other words, it has become, in that peculiarly dismissive American use of the word, "history": events located in a past tense or time, no longer significantly connected to present action or perception. In the video age, of course, history has another existence, in reruns on cable where the chronologies of what in more certain times was historical fact succumb to the more random sequencing of prime-time segmentation and channel surfing. Now that so much of the choice footage of the event most thoroughly documented on celluloid is in the public domain, recompilations of that event will play and replay the war as a movie.

Thomas Doherty's *Projections of War* argues that, in several senses, the war always was a movie, or at least, that American perceptions of the war were always mediated by Hollywood. Lt. Clark Gable might have observed, in a press conference, that the difference between bombing Germany and flying combat missions in the movies was that "in the real thing you're not particularly interested in how you look." (196) But the combat cinematographers of the Army Signal Corps and Navy Photographic Unit knew better; they were trained by instructors drawn from the motion picture industry. The battle of Iwo Jima was filmed by 60 combat cameramen under the supervision of former Hollywood screenwriter Lt. Cmdr. John W. McLain, who was given access to the invasion plans to help him storyboard his coverage. McLain instructed his photographers "to shoot American action right to left, and enemy action left to right, thus enabling the public to get a good perspective of the action from the screen and also to help the film cutters do a better job." (262) It was under these conventions of representation that motion pictures became the predominant archival record of the war.

Movies taught Americans how to fight, how to feel about the war, how to recognize and hate the enemy. As well as *Mrs. Miniver*, *Air Force*, and *Tender Comrade*, the studios pumped out military training films, and pumped them out at bargain rates, abandoning their usual accounting practices to eliminate overhead charges and contract salaries. As the chief of the Army Pictorial Division told a Senate Committee investigating the National Defense Program in February, 1943, the Army got the directorial services of George Cukor for $50 a month. (63) In that year, too, war work accounted for 94% of production at the Disney studio.

Doherty's attention to Hollywood's other forms of production is the great strength of his book, and acts as an important counter to the criticism of studio feature-film content established as early as 1945 by Dorothy B. Jones' semi-official opinion that 96% of wartime features had not significantly increased understanding of the conflict. Few historians of wartime Hollywood will argue with Doherty's central assumption that "at no other time was the motion picture industry more deliberately engaged in documenting, and making, American history." Whether in feature films, shorts, or newsreels, the movies represented the war to its participants in accordance with a more overt ideological agenda than at any other period in their history. That ideological agenda was, moreover, determined by a more intensive level of government interference in the day-to-day operation of film production than had happened before or has happened since. However, Doherty's claim that the years between 1941 and 1945 saw a fundamental renegotiation in the contract between movies and their spectators is more asserted than proven.

Doherty suggest that during the war, the industry "committed itself to the flagrant transmission of cultural values," but the industry had, through the Production Code and its various precursors, been committed to the overt transmission of cultural values arguably since 1909 and certainly since the early 1930s. Through the MPPDA and its subsidiary organizations it had also established a series of mechanisms for negotiating with and accommodating the demands and restrictions of a variety of external bodies. Indeed, as Doherty's own argument illustrates, the OWI's (Office of War Information) Bureau of Motion Pictures sought a relationship with the studios similar to that enjoyed by the MPPDA's Production Code Administration, essentially dependent on what BMP Director Nelson Poynter called "personal discussion, conference, and comparing of viewpoint," backed up, if necessary, by an element of compulsion. (43)

In his account of the OWI, Doherty provides a useful supplement to Clayton Koppes and Gregory Black's *Hollywood Goes to War*, and much the same could be said of his chapter on "The Negro Soldier" in relation to Thomas Cripps's *Making Movies Black*. In general, his account of Hollywood's "genre work" builds on and extends Jeanine Basinger's *The World War II Combat Film* rather than revises any of Basinger's commentaries. *Projections of War* is at its best in its primary sources, among the trade press, where Doherty's sharp eye for the telling incident and the revealing quote con-

structs a well-paced and absorbing narrative. I particularly treasure the advertising tag line for *Five Graves to Cairo* (1943) that described it as a "sensational *Rommel*odrama," and Harry Warner's memorably vicious observation that his studio "would hate to be known as the company that made the most successful musical film of this great war for freedom." (193, 183)

However, in a book seeking to counter a critical consensus that condescends to or condemns the film record of 1941–1945, the question of tone is crucial, and the breathless, condensed style that so enhanced the argument of *Teenagers and Teenpix* works with less assurance here. Doherty's delight in Hollywood's absurd bad taste on occasion contradicts his seriousness of purpose. His book avoids diving into what, in a dismissive paragraph, he calls "the swirling waters of cinematic metaphysics," but he also restricts the depth and duration of his analysis of any individual movie. This hampers his ability to demonstrate an argument which, in the end, he only asserts—that, between 1941 and 1945, "a linear, bookbound mentality was displaced by a movie-mediated vision. Moving images became the new alphabet, the hieroglyphics of meaning and memory for American culture." (6)

Doherty argues that by 1943, the problems of wartime representation had largely been resolved into "something like an official line," articulated in such movies as *Casablanca*, *Since You Went Away*, and *They Were Expendable*: "War is a serious business, where people you love die, where you sacrifice your personal desires for the nation's good, where the enemy is deadly not dumb, where there is true glory but where victory exacts a price." (133) The studios had, in other words, successfully adapted Hollywood's generic conventions to the vicissitudes of the moment, albeit in a way that led to several points of subsequent discomfort, most obviously in the support for its wartime Soviet ally and its unremittingly racist treatment of the Japanese enemy. But Doherty's claim that the war represented a watershed in the recognition of the cultural power of American movies remains unsubstantiated, and Michael Renov's conclusion, in *Hollywood's Wartime Women,* that the war saw few changes in the design and execution of Hollywood's product seems closer to the evidence Doherty provides.

A final chapter, "Legacies," traces the relatively familiar story of Hollywood's retreat from its wartime political commitments, and surveys the war movie's history through to Vietnam. There is little new here, and this chapter reads more like an addition suggested by the publisher than an integrated part of the project. It does, however, remind us of what Doherty identifies as "the most significant continuity between wartime cinema and postwar cinema . . . the fact that Hollywood never stopped making movies about the Second World War." (271) It also illustrates how the genre's formulas changed as the war was viewed in the retrospect of embroidered myth. But rather than providing another account of *Platoon* as a deconstruction of the Warners infantry movie, it might have been more illuminating to consider in more detail how Vietnam-era representations of World War II—*The Dirty Dozen* or *Kelly's Heroes*, for example—were inflected by their contemporary context.

Finally, a complaint from the Campaign for Real Footnotes. *Projections of War* has neither footnotes nor endnotes, but reference notes "cued by page number and identifying phrase." This convention is presumably inspired by the publisher's belief that "the general reader" is intimidated by the presence of little numbers in the text directing you to sources or discursive elaboration. Such conventions may be appropriate in the world of pulp biography, but for an academic readership—undoubtedly the majority for this book and the series it appears in—such a manner of presenting evidence is an inefficient irritation.

RICHARD MALTBY

■ Richard Maltby is a senior lecturer in American film at the University of Exeter in the United Kingdom.

Running Scared

Masculinity and the Representation of the Male Body

By Peter Lehman. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1993. $29.95 cloth; $16.95 paper.

Does Hollywood support patriarchy by refusing to display the penises of its actors? Does the movie industry's bashfulness about male genitals serve the same purposes as its regular exposure of the female body? In *Running Scared: Masculinity and the Representation of the Male Body*, Peter Lehman makes the case for both premises. He argues that the camera's turning away from the male genital region mystifies masculinity, thus contributing to the power imbalances that always operate in the depiction of male and female bodies. Although this thesis sounds simple if not intuitively obvious, Lehman covers a great deal of ground in explor-

structs a well-paced and absorbing narrative. I particularly treasure the advertising tag line for *Five Graves to Cairo* (1943) that described it as a "sensational *Rommel*odrama," and Harry Warner's memorably vicious observation that his studio "would hate to be known as the company that made the most successful musical film of this great war for freedom." (193, 183)

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Does Hollywood support patriarchy by refusing to display the penises of its actors? Does the movie industry's bashfulness about male genitals serve the same purposes as its regular exposure of the female body? In *Running Scared: Masculinity and the Representation of the Male Body*, Peter Lehman makes the case for both premises. He argues that the camera's turning away from the male genital region mystifies masculinity, thus contributing to the power imbalances that always operate in the depiction of male and female bodies. Although this thesis sounds simple if not intuitively obvious, Lehman covers a great deal of ground in explor-

ing how the male body is represented. Mainstream Hollywood is only one of the areas he considers; he also covers independent documentary, pornographic film, and Japanese, French, Spanish, Dutch, and German cinema; in other chapters he moves beyond cinema to pulp fiction, ancient Greek art, avant-garde photography, current debates in anthropology, and the discourses of "sexology" in nineteenth- and twentieth-century medicine.

Working primarily from within a psychoanalytic model, Lehman traces the massive displacement of anxieties about the penis into all manner of cultural production, especially stories about men with disabilities, disfigurements, small bodies, unconventional social roles, etc. He is careful to distinguish the penis—what Lacan calls "the pound of flesh"—from the phallus, the grand signifier that has empowered men at the same time as, according to Lehman, it has alienated them from their own bodies. The author has doubts, however, about a unified theory that would explain the representation of the male body in different discourses and at different historical moments. He pragmatically appropriates ideas from the usual suspects without insisting on the total applicability of any to his project; in an introductory passage, he characterizes himself as a critic/historian working in an area where too little research has been done to validate any single theory.

Like many film scholars who have ventured into the labyrinths of sexual difference, Lehman is especially critical of Laura Mulvey's mid-1970s argument that only women can be held up as objects of display in dominant cinema. But his conviction that women and heterosexual men are quite capable of finding multiple levels of pleasures in looking at male bodies puts him in the dangerous position of claiming for straight men some of the same territory that has been staked out by feminists and queer theorists. Realizing that he can be accused of bringing straight male subjectivity back to the center it had, until quite recently, occupied for much too long, Lehman assembles a stunning range of texts to demonstrate the need to look at men with new critical paradigms. By no means, however, can he be associated with rearguard actions such as the mythopoetic men's movement: many of these back-to-"nature" types would remystify exactly what Lehman has sought to demystify.

Lehman is especially convincing in his readings of films such as Pedro Almodóvar's *What Have I Done to Deserve This?*, Paul Schrader's *American Gigolo*, and Nagisa Oshima's *In the Realm of the Senses*. Early in Almodóvar's audacious assault upon family melodrama, Carmen Maura's character is approached by a well-muscled athlete whose impotence prevents him from having intercourse with her; he is also shown to have a small and unerect penis. Later on, after Maura kills her husband by clubbing him with a ham bone, the athlete reappears as the detective who cannot find the killer. For Lehman, a gay director has shown that women can possess the phallus and that the impotence hiding behind macho posturing can be a metaphor for the allegedly phallic power of the Law.

In *American Gigolo*, Julian (Richard Gere) occupies a quite different register of masculinity, one that allows for the display of his penis but not for the phallic masculinity of more conventional male stars. As a man whose profession is purely the satisfaction of women, Gere's character is emasculated by his nickname ("Julie") as well as by his consistent inability to master the dangerous circumstances into which the plot thrusts him. Lehman argues that Gere never recovers from an early scene with Lauren Hutton in which his body is displayed according to conventions developed almost entirely for female characters. "His powerlessness is the price he pays for standing nude while a woman and we, the spectators, look at him."

Lehman's analysis of *In the Realm of the Senses* opposes the representation of the male body in Oshima's film to three well-established traditions: mainstream Hollywood narratives, hard-core pornography of the 1960s and 1970s, and Japanese woodblock painting of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. After linking these traditions to critical works by Linda Williams, Jane Gallop, Stephen Heath, Maureen Turim, Dana Polan, and Robert Melville, Lehman compellingly argues for the ideological significance of the contradictory moment when Kichi's normal-sized, flaccid penis seems to become large, even erect, after it has been severed from his body.

In reading these films, Lehman analyzes camera style and editing as well as the cultural articulation of maleness and masculinity. He is just as sensitive to the conventions behind Jim Thompson's fiction and the photography of Sarah Kent and Robert Mapplethorpe. And in his treatment of *Dick Talk*, an anonymously produced videotape in which women discuss their sexual experiences with men, he is both skeptical of free-flowing stereotypes and sympathetic to the need for women to verbalize their desires.

In the conclusion of *Running Scared*, Lehman turns to a celebration of Roy Orbison, from whose song he has taken his title. Lehman casts Orbison as a unique figure whose music and persona were almost completely unconventional, especially his form of masculinity and sexuality. He also argues that "a streak of masochism runs throughout the dark sexuality of Orbison's songs," even in his best known recording, "Oh, Pretty Woman," in which the singer supposedly rejects "powerful masculine roles, preferring instead to be passively accepted or rejected." It always seemed to me that Orbison was adopting a more familiar, leering stance in "Oh, Pretty

Woman," and far from being virtually sui generis as Lehman suggests, the singer is firmly anchored in a tradition of crooning tenors and falsettos, both black (Skip James) and white (Jimmie Rodgers).

Nevertheless, in his treatment of Orbison, Lehman has richly expanded the semiotics of popular music by finding drama and ethos in one singer's self-presentation. He has employed his substantial skills as a film scholar to read the performed masculinity of Orbison in much the same way that he has illuminated maleness in films from quite different periods and cultures. Writing with clarity and conviction, Lehman has published an essential text for anyone interested in the study of masculinity and its depictions.

KRIN GABBARD

■ Krin Gabbard teaches in the Department of Comparative Literature at SUNY, Stony Brook.

Spectacular Bodies

Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema

By Yvonne Tasker. New York: Routledge, 1993. $55.00 cloth; $16.95 paper.

The image on the cover of *Spectacular Bodies*—Jean-Claude van Damme stripped to the waist—suggests that watching handsome bodies, and other pleasures of action cinema, will be explored in depth. But while the book's primary theme is how American action films hinge on the hero or heroine's body, many pleasures go unmentioned or are merely gestured at. This is ironic, since Yvonne Tasker is determined to celebrate the pleasures of the broadly defined genre and defend it against critical disdain and neglect. Still, the book succeeds; everyone who reads it will think twice about dismissing popular films.

Tasker charges that despite (and because of) its popularity with audiences, action cinema is dismissed by critics and theorists as "both *simple* and *obvious*." (166) Much of their hostility and neglect is purely elitist. Some stems from a belief that the form is not relevant; for instance, Tasker thinks feminist criticism slights "popular texts and pleasures" (5) by assuming they can be quickly analyzed and moved beyond. But detractors are also often looking for other sources of pleasure. Tasker, however, in her "desire to think about, rather, than dismiss, or pathologise, the pleasures of the popular cinema," (166) nicely skewers a bias against spectacle or "visual pleasure" (6) in favor of dialogue and narrative development by declaring that "the cinema as a sensuous experience is too often neglected." (6) Yet surely this dichotomy is overcome by the best and most complex films. Tasker overlooks something more pertinent: the pleasures of action cinema *are* sometimes simple and obvious, which is not to say it is easy to create the necessary effects. Although Tasker uses the terms pejoratively, obviousness and simplicity are never de facto negatives.

A more common charge against popular movies is that they lack depth. And unfortunately for Tasker, her attempts to demonstrate ambiguity, complexity, and polysemy—even if successful—don't necessarily imply depth. A film can have many levels of meaning, can be read in a variety of ways, and still not be profound. The assumption that these films have "something to say" (5) and are in need of "accounts" rather than "explanations" is a necessary starting point. The onus is on Tasker to demonstrate the genre's significance, and she has mixed success. More often than not, she merely highlights the ambiguity and complexity of what are variously termed action movies, popular movies, muscle movies, and muscular action movies.

There are exceptions. Chapter 1, "Women Warriors," looks at the rise of the action heroine in mainstream movies, and provides a good overview of the predominant ways in which female characters function in action movies. The chapter "Black Buddies and White Heroes" is solid on questions of race, and "Tough Guys and Wise-Guys" offers a gently probing discussion of bodybuilding and the male muscle hero as spectacle, in contrast to heroes and heroines with verbal attributes. Tasker does persuade that two recent movies, *Rambo* and *Thelma & Louise,* don't give dominant ideologies a blank check. The latter is read as utopian, as a comic action film and not a feminist manifesto. As for *Rambo*, Tasker shows that its politics are not overdetermined. A film assumed by the cine-literate to be Neanderthal is effectively used to deflate academic criticism that "seeks to politically pin down popular cinema." (5) By virtue of its open-endedness, one of the book's strongest general claims and strategies is that while action films and their central male characters are often analyzed as political, their meaning is "far from stable or unambiguous"; (71) it's a mistake to automatically read the muscular hero as "a *simplistic* embodiment of a reactionary masculine identity." (109)

Is it enough to establish a reasonable doubt about whether *Rambo* espouses a conservative, Reaganite ideology? If Tasker is right about the "multiplicity and instability of meaning," (93) why shouldn't the film be

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read that way? Granted, her main points are that one shouldn't dismiss a film based on a *superficial* reading, and that one reading doesn't exhaust the political implications of a film. But she offers no way to rank readings or pleasures. Hesitancy to give a definitive reading is fine; the assumption that all readings are of equal value as long as they start from some accurate assumptions—e.g., spectacle should not be downgraded in favor of narrative development—is just plain wrong.

Assessing the central theme of the body can start with the question, What do *Rambo* and *Thelma & Louise* have in common? Like *Raging Bull*, *Basic Instinct*, and a host of other movies discussed, they bear out Tasker's claim that the defining characteristic of American action cinema is the hero/heroine's body as the primary site of spectacular visual display. More specifically, the damaged body of the hero is "the place of last resort . . . the sole narrative space that is safe" even "when constantly under attack." (151) The recent hit *Speed* comes to mind. The female character drives the bus, assuming the masculine role, and then has dynamite strapped to her body. In the crunch, however, the punished and punishing male body is savior, and so *Speed* bears out another of Tasker's major claims. Namely, there is a double action with regard to gender identity—"popular cinema affirms gendered identities" while undermining their stability with conflicting identifications and desires. (5) In the cover shot, Jean-Claude van Damme is both menacing and alluring. Yet the traditional, masculine, warrior role is not canceled by his status as sex object; the two possible sources of pleasure feed off one another.

The points made about the role of the body and muscular cinema are well taken but don't go far enough. Another example: the term "musculinity" is coined in the introduction to describe the phenomenon whereby "physical definition of masculinity in terms of a developed musculature" is not simply male. (3) The payoff comes late in the book. In contemporary action cinema, qualities typically associated with masculinity mark screen women—"signifiers of strength are not limited to male characters." (149) Tasker's preferred examples of films in which gender roles have been destabilized thus are *Aliens*, *Thelma & Louise*, and *Basic Instinct*. But her argument that men are not often sexual spectacles while women characters drive more and more narratives is weakened by being made subservient to her thesis about the body: "This serves to remind us that the meaning of the body on the screen is not secure, but shifting, inscribed with meaning in different ways at different points." (165) How is this different than the meaning of anything else on the screen? Everything must get caught in this net of ambiguity.

Tasker's analyses of the relationship between representation of the body and gender identity are diffuse and often lack context. Conclusions in *Spectacular Bodies* strike this reader as obvious or transparently true, which would be fine if Tasker took the next step of describing how these conclusions might translate into pleasurable experience for the viewer. The response that exactly how these pleasures are registered cannot or need not be described implies they are simple and obvious.

Identifying or uncovering a potential source of pleasure is partly an evaluative act. And while a theorist may not want to generalize from what excites her, she should at least suggest why we may find certain spectacles captivating. Tasker's defensive posture doesn't allow that many of the pleasures of action cinema are basic, unambiguous, and culturally overdetermined. They might include well-orchestrated violence, sex, revenge, good versus evil, triumph of the underdog, and suspense. For all her musings against elitist critics, Tasker shares their assumption that what is simple and obvious is worthless.

Spectacular Bodies is not quite academic and not quite popularizing, and it will be read by students of popular culture, film theorists, and action fans. Although well versed in critical theory, Tasker doesn't have a methodological (or theoretical) tact which might have given some structure and sense of progression (in terms of, say, genre or chronology) to a book littered with interesting insights, some alternative readings, and strained analogies. Her way of denying that action films are uniform and univalent, "dumb movies for dumb people," turns out to be overkill. Simply by writing *Spectacular Bodies,* Tasker proves that action films cannot be taken at face value. But the face is part of the human body, and sometimes we quickly read faces and are deeply moved.

JOHN P. MCCARTHY

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Still Life in Real Time

Theory After Television

By Richard Dienst. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994. $49.95 cloth; $16.95 paper.

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Raymond Williams, Marxist political economy, Heidegger's ontology, Derridean deconstruction, and Deleuze's film theory.

Richard Dienst, who teaches at Purdue, does an admirable job of canvassing various bodies of writing, but only those intimately familiar with these thinkers will be able to engage the book on its own highly abstract level.

Dienst's fully-realized goal is to "dislodge television from its cozy nest of familiarity." (4) His claims for theory—"a highly mobile kind of cultural practice" (x)—stop short of any correspondence theory of truth. Theory cannot be understood as "the pursuit of a 'true picture of things' but as the invention of concepts, or more precisely, the invention of *theoretical images*." (x) Dienst wants to link these images to those produced by television. Not only does he tendentiously attribute this view of truth to the thinkers examined, he relieves himself of the obligation to spell out the significance of these links to television. Although it would be helpful if he played a more active role as guide, enough connections are made, and looking at theory in the blinding light of television does force us to look at television differently. Specifically, Dienst uncovers surprising answers to two questions: How does television create value? and, What is that value? Time, for better or (usually) worse, is his short answer to both.

Part I, "Televisual Flows," deals with television from historical and economic perspectives. Chapter 1, "The Outbreak of Television," undermines the idea that television was ever a transparent medium engaged in pure communication, or one that unified through the free trade of information. Dienst carefully teases out some implications of Raymond Williams' *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, posing penetrating questions about the birth of television. He also offers a lucid discussion of the technological apparatus, and analyzes the concept of "flow," extending this notion beyond what is normally found in the literature on television. Put simply: "Constant interruption has been transformed into something like its opposite, continuity." (26) Television is a curiosity shop that viewers rummage through for pleasure and possibly learning, but the actuality of visual time blurs and overpowers any messages and inhibits retention. Television time is taking over, and Dienst sees this as an urgent problem for cultural theory.

In the second chapter, "Image/Machine/Image: Marx and Metaphor in Television Theory," Dienst examines the economic basis and function of television without any reductionism. His familiarity with recent Marxist cultural theory yields excellent points about television as a machine producing economic value. While the idea that "economics is the basic level at which to diagram television's system" (xi) is hardly original, Dienst's treatment of the role of television in "late capitalism" is subtle (if inevitably schematic) and rewards close study. Consumption is read as something that television does to viewers' time. The true value produced is not meaning or pleasure, images or information, but a structure of time and a mechanism for profit. (xi)

Time is also the thread running through the three chapters on American programming in Part II, "Commercial Breaks." The ambitiously entitled "History, the Eternal Return: On *Crime Story*" deals with a series broadcast on NBC from 1986 to 88. Dienst argues that the way "Crime Story" handles various historical periods and settings mirrors the workings of television as a whole. In chapter 4, "Mondino, MTV, and the Laugh of Madonna," he offers an eloquent analysis of MTV and music videos, accusing them of in effect robbing both the viewer and the artist. Chapter 5, "Appetite and Satisfaction, a Golden Circle: Magic and Commerce in *Twin Peaks*," brilliantly dissects the "Twin Peaks" phenomenon.

The three chapters in Part III, "Theoretical Images," offer hard-core philosophical speculations. Dienst believes all the important terms in television theory are in play in Heidegger's work, including representation, subjectivity, technology, modernity, and the world. Heidegger can be read as providing the argument that television is the "unmentionable end point in the long decline of Western culture and civilization into falsity, instrumentality, and banality." (104) On the one hand, Dienst thinks this condemnation is too easy. On the other, in chapter 6, "The Dangers of Being in a Televised World: Heidegger and the Ontotechnological Question," he proceeds to endorse it, grappling with the ontological status of television and how it inhibits authenticity. This application of Heidegger is exhilarating, but we are on such a rarefied level it's hard to see how television differs from other forms of communication. Existential anxieties about TV's apocalyptic implications are taken to the extreme when it is compared to the atom bomb. This chapter doesn't satisfy partly because of the difficulties of Heidegger's thought, and partly because, as Dienst admits, from an ontological point of view, television "leaves us roughly where we started." (xii)

Chapter 7, "From Post Cards to Smart Bombs (and Back Again): Derrida and the Televisual Textual System," offers a deconstructive look at television as a means of communication. Dienst applies ideas from Derrida's *The Post Card*, using the postcard to read television's delivery of images and information. The upshot is that meaning in and through television is as unstable as any other meaning.

Dienst turns to Deleuze in order to analyze televisual images or television's mise-en-scène. Chapter 8, "Ineluctable Modalities of the Televisual," begins with a disorienting jaunt through Deleuze's theory of cinema.

Adapting Jameson's notion of "machine time," Dienst then introduces two categories for explicating the way television analyzes all its content—still time and automatic time, the two directions in which time moves on TV. The first are still images with rapid cuts in between; automatic time occurs when one image appears and is left running, making it "the time of the camera's relentless stare." (161) Still time signals that images are in the past, automatic time moves into the future with all the anticipation or boredom that may involve. The crucial point is that it is not entities or situations that are being presented on television, but rather "the archaic speeds of their appearing." (165) The switching, mixing, and cutting of time in these two ways leaves television stuck somewhere in between older technological forms of communication which deal in static images and codes, and new technologies where the flow of digital information is instantaneous and allegedly unadulterated.

A major attribute of *Still Life in Real Time* is how originally it conveys a sense of the ubiquity and immensity of television. Automatic time forces us to keep watching, and still time forces us to keep switching. This gives the television image exorbitant power over our images of the past and the future, of things familiar and alien. Dienst constantly insists we move beyond television and the particular theories and conceptual schemes used to comprehend it, thus reclaiming "the power to create images of our own" (xiii) and realizing "the radical potential of thinking beyond television." (xii) Seeing and thinking past television is a Herculean task. Richard Dienst is up to it.

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Theorizing Documentary

Edited by Michael Renov. New York: Routledge/AFI, 1993. $49.95 cloth; $15.95 paper.

In this significant contribution to the new work being done on the documentary, Michael Renov aspires to reconceptualize traditional notions of the nonfiction film in light of contemporary critical theory. *Theorizing Documentary* is, in this sense, something of a companion volume to Bill Nichols' *Representing Reality* (1991). Renov has collected essays by nine scholars (including Nichols), who approach documentary cinema from such perspectives as, in the editor's own words, "historiography, postmodern theory, and philosophy." (4) The issues they discuss range widely, from ethical to ideological to formal. All but one of the essays are published here for the first time (the exception, Trinh T. Minh-ha's "The Totalizing Quest for Meaning," appeared in an earlier form in her own 1991 collection, *When the Moon Waxes Red*).

Renov boldly declares at the outset of his introduction that, because documentary cinema raises the same theoretical questions as fiction film, "It may well be that the marginalization of the documentary film as a subject of serious inquiry is at an end." (1) Whether or not this is the case, certainly Renov has in mind the pioneering work of Nichols, particularly his analysis of the discursive similarities and differences between documentary and fiction. In *Theorizing Documentary*, despite the different emphases of Renov's selections, in one way or another they all address how, in Nichols' words, documentaries are "a fiction (un)like any other."

Brian Winston offers some solid historical research to examine how scientific discourse is necessarily built into cinema as an apparatus. (41) His discussion ranges from cinema's prehistory to contemporary practice, although he focuses in greatest detail on the direct cinema and cinéma vérité movements in the 1960s. Winston's conclusion that the contemporary sundering of signified and signifier in the visual image, a radical revision of the cinema's status as science brought about by technological innovations in the apparatus itself, assumes greater urgency in the wake of a movie like *Forrest Gump* (1994), with its computer-enhanced images of "history." Philip Rosen examines the documentary film in terms of the discourses of historiography; but if much of what he has to say about the Griersonian concept of documentary seems to rehash past arguments, he does offer some valuable distinctions between the kinds of "history" offered by cinema and television news, and he effectively challenges the relevance of Baudrillard's take on postmodernism in the context of our experience and understanding of documentary. In typically provocative fashion, Nichols discusses some recent documentaries—*The Thin Blue Line* (1990), *Our Marilyn* (1988), *Tongues Untied* (1989)—in terms of how they address the human body as documentary signifier.

Other chapters are more concerned with contextualizing documentary's truth claims ideologically. Trinh critiques all documentaries for their claim to "a totalizing quest for knowledge." In a relatively brief piece that seems somewhat overshadowed by the theoretical weight of the other essays, Bill Horrigan discusses the production of AIDS-related documentaries in terms of "the importance of people owning and being able to determine the terms of how they are visually represented." (170) "Three American Moments," a par-

Adapting Jameson's notion of "machine time," Dienst then introduces two categories for explicating the way television analyzes all its content—still time and automatic time, the two directions in which time moves on TV. The first are still images with rapid cuts in between; automatic time occurs when one image appears and is left running, making it "the time of the camera's relentless stare." (161) Still time signals that images are in the past, automatic time moves into the future with all the anticipation or boredom that may involve. The crucial point is that it is not entities or situations that are being presented on television, but rather "the archaic speeds of their appearing." (165) The switching, mixing, and cutting of time in these two ways leaves television stuck somewhere in between older technological forms of communication which deal in static images and codes, and new technologies where the flow of digital information is instantaneous and allegedly unadulterated.

A major attribute of *Still Life in Real Time* is how originally it conveys a sense of the ubiquity and immensity of television. Automatic time forces us to keep watching, and still time forces us to keep switching. This gives the television image exorbitant power over our images of the past and the future, of things familiar and alien. Dienst constantly insists we move beyond television and the particular theories and conceptual schemes used to comprehend it, thus reclaiming "the power to create images of our own" (xiii) and realizing "the radical potential of thinking beyond television." (xii) Seeing and thinking past television is a Herculean task. Richard Dienst is up to it.

JOHN P. MCCARTHY

■ John P. McCarthy writes on film and television from New York City.

Theorizing Documentary

Edited by Michael Renov. New York: Routledge/AFI, 1993. $49.95 cloth; $15.95 paper.

In this significant contribution to the new work being done on the documentary, Michael Renov aspires to reconceptualize traditional notions of the nonfiction film in light of contemporary critical theory. *Theorizing Documentary* is, in this sense, something of a companion volume to Bill Nichols' *Representing Reality* (1991). Renov has collected essays by nine scholars (including Nichols), who approach documentary cinema from such perspectives as, in the editor's own words, "historiography, postmodern theory, and philosophy." (4) The issues they discuss range widely, from ethical to ideological to formal. All but one of the essays are published here for the first time (the exception, Trinh T. Minh-ha's "The Totalizing Quest for Meaning," appeared in an earlier form in her own 1991 collection, *When the Moon Waxes Red*).

Renov boldly declares at the outset of his introduction that, because documentary cinema raises the same theoretical questions as fiction film, "It may well be that the marginalization of the documentary film as a subject of serious inquiry is at an end." (1) Whether or not this is the case, certainly Renov has in mind the pioneering work of Nichols, particularly his analysis of the discursive similarities and differences between documentary and fiction. In *Theorizing Documentary*, despite the different emphases of Renov's selections, in one way or another they all address how, in Nichols' words, documentaries are "a fiction (un)like any other."

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ticularly fine piece by Paul Arthur, balances history, ideology, and textual analysis to show how each of these moments (New Deal documentaries of the 1930s; direct cinema of the 1960s; and what Arthur terms the new "aesthetics of failure" in recent ironic pastiches such as *Sherman's March* [1987] and *Roger and Me* [1989]) privileges a particular discourse (a "jargon of authenticity") in its claim to present the real.

Two other essays similarly promise to theorize documentary as a form by concentrating on readings of specific texts, although there is a marked difference in their achievement. Ana M. Lopez discusses the Brazilian TV mini-series "America" as a postmodern text that is less about the "real" America than it is an examination of its cultural representations "through a distinct filter of otherness." (153) Susan Scheibler's reading of Wim Wenders' *Lightning over Water* balances both film theory and philosophy, particularly J. L. Austin's distinction between the constantive and performative functions of language. But while Lopez's analysis raises provocative questions about marginality and postcolonial discourse generally, Scheibler's seems to bog down in a swamp of terminology, ultimately making Wenders' film seem as dry as the writer's own style.

Renov's own contribution attempts to negotiate the seemingly antagonistic concerns of science and art in the context of elucidating a "poetics," or the "principles of construction," of nonfiction film. As he says himself, he seeks to explore "the notion of an explicit 'documentary desire,' a desire-to-know aligned with the drive for an enabling mastery of the lived environs." (5) Renov identifies four documentary "modalities"—to record, reveal or preserve; to persuade or promote; to analyze or interrogate; and to express—and considers the manner in which each is "fueled" by desire, or what Nichols has called "epistephilia." These modalities are different from Nichols' four documentary modes of representation (which are more rhetorically based), but curiously reminiscent of the structuring principles of Erik Barnouw's 1974 history, *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*, with its chapter headings of "Explorer," "Reporter," "Painter," "Promoter," and so on. Renov disagrees with Nichols' subsuming of documentary under the rubric of "discourse of sobriety" for, in his view, documentary shares too closely so many of the techniques and pleasures of narrative cinema. However, to what extent this is revelatory as opposed to obvious is a matter of opinion, much like the recent "discovery" that identification in the cinema is fluid, not bound by gender.

About a third of the essays in the volume originated as papers delivered at the 1990 Ohio University Film Conference. But Renov has provided a logical structure for the essays so that the book is more than simply a collection of conference papers; rather, he has arranged them so that they play off each other in provocative ways. For instance, Rosen's insistence on the a priori existence of the historical real in documentary as a direct challenge to Baudrillard's view of postmodernism is followed by Trinh's discussion of documentary as anthropology and her claim that "there is no such thing as documentary" because its "truth is often nothing more than a meaning." (90–92) Trinh is, in turn, followed by Arthur, who finds in the most recent of the "three American moments" he analyzes a reaction against an "epistemic ambition to speak from a totalizing framework of knowledge about some fully intelligible reality." (128)

It is no coincidence that both Renov's introduction and the volume's final chapter, the contribution of Nichols, conclude by citing the Rodney King videotape as a lesson that interpretation is as important to documentary as it is to fiction film. This is, indeed, the informing theme of the book, and one that Renov views with some urgency. He has no hesitation in asserting that his collection will provide a significant step toward the reexamination of the relations between fiction and nonfiction texts, and thus will contribute toward the redefinition of "the core and periphery of film and television studies." (2) For the most part, the thoughtful essays he has gathered here very likely will.

BARRY KEITH GRANT

■ Barry Keith Grant is Director of Film Studies at Brock University in Ontario, Canada, and the author of *Voyages of Discovery: The Cinema of Frederick Wiseman*.

Visual "Literacy"

Image, Mind, and Reality

By Paul Messaris. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994. $59.00 cloth; $17.95 paper.

At the heart of this insightful book is the question: How can images and whole films or videos conjure up a world of almost palpable objects and events, despite the many differences between the appearance of the real world and the appearance of any kind of picture? Answering this question clarifies the issue of visual "literacy." What do we need to know to comprehend still and moving images, and edited scenes? What benefits

ticularly fine piece by Paul Arthur, balances history, ideology, and textual analysis to show how each of these moments (New Deal documentaries of the 1930s; direct cinema of the 1960s; and what Arthur terms the new "aesthetics of failure" in recent ironic pastiches such as *Sherman's March* [1987] and *Roger and Me* [1989]) privileges a particular discourse (a "jargon of authenticity") in its claim to present the real.

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can a thorough grounding in visual communication bring to the audience? While some conceptually overstuffed accounts of visual literacy exaggerate their claims, Paul Messaris's treatment of the issue is lucidly presented, precisely argued, and for the most part, convincing.

His argument will be controversial, since he denies some of the fundamental tenets of those who claim that film is a language (or like a language). Instead, he opts for discarding unproductive analogies between language and visual communication and claims that, unlike the conventions of written language or speech, many "pictorial conventions for the representation of objects and events are based on information-processing skills that a viewer can be assumed to possess even in the absence of any previous experience with pictures." (4) In this claim he clearly disagrees with scholars who say that visual literacy is a prerequisite for any comprehension of visual media. If film is composed solely of arbitrary symbols and codes, then we must learn the language of film to understand what it communicates. On the other hand, if we need only real-world perceptual skills to comprehend film at a basic level, the search for the value of visual literacy must begin elsewhere.

Nor does Messaris find the worth of visual literacy in the development of special cognitive skills. Some argue that visual literacy improves our ability to understand the world by enhancing spatial intelligence or analogical thinking, or that the exposure to image discourse affects the viewer's system of cognitive classification. Messaris disagrees, claiming that, unlike language, images are primarily a presentational mode of communication, and are incapable of directly representing nonvisual experiences or abstract entities. He concludes that the connection between cinematic or pictorial experience and "extra-cinematic or extrapictorial abstractive/analogical skills must remain a very tentative hypothesis." (134)

If all this is true, then of what worth is visual literacy, and why should it be a pedagogical goal? Messaris finds that visual literacy enhances viewers' awareness of both visual artistry and rhetorical manipulation; in this lies its importance. Messaris claims that most spectators lack explicit awareness of how the visual media create meaning. Visual literacy encourages self-consciousness in viewers about their role as interpreters. To appreciate the poetics of film-making, for example, viewers must have some familiarity with film-makers' ways of handling various representational problems. Messaris makes the problematic assertion that *admiration* for the skill of the artist is "the essence of the aesthetic approach to works of art." (136) Nevertheless, the general point stands—that visual literacy enables us to appreciate the aesthetic elements of film and video.

Visual literacy also increases the explicit awareness of the making of meaning and of visual rhetoric. Messaris claims that the classical style of film-making encourages what he calls "an assumption of naturalistic narration," (153) and that visual literacy thus has ideological implications:

> It equips the viewer for drawing inferences about the broader social implications of images, and it can also be assumed to make one less vulnerable to their influence. . . . [T]he starting point for the interpretive processes this kind of visual literacy makes possible is the judgment that a particular image, feature of an image, or juxtaposition of images should be taken as a deliberate expression of an intended meaning. (138)

For Messaris, visual literacy equips the spectator not for comprehension of meaning but for an understanding of the processes of making meaning, and of the rhetorical intent behind visual representations.

Many have argued that visual literacy leads to critical viewing. In this respect, Messaris offers nothing new. The value of the book is in its systematic account of *how* visual literacy enhances critical viewing. For example, though film theorists have long been writing about illusionism, Messaris gives a fresh account of the phenomenon. The enormous effort that goes into creating authenticity and realism in a Hollywood film, he argues, does not cause the viewer to misperceive the presence of staging (she or he is aware, at some level, that it is a film being viewed). However, it can cause the spectator to *overlook* the fictional nature of what is seen. Citing a series of empirical experiments, Messaris notes that the "consistent finding of these studies has been that even relatively knowledgeable viewers tend to talk about fictional characters and situations as if they were subject to the rules of everyday reality instead of the conventions of a medium and the intentions of its users." (149) One of the primary purposes of visual literacy, then, is to encourage the detection of and attention to artifice, and beyond that, "the analysis and evaluation of purpose." (154)

This brief summary of Messaris's position has so far ignored an important methodological element of the book—its reliance on an effective combination of logical argument and empirical evidence. Its typical means of argument is to first explore the relevant issue philosophically, then turn to empirical research for additional evidence. For example, Messaris writes that the interpretation of edited sequences in film depends less on "decoding" formal devices—the various devices of analytic and continuity editing—than on an understanding of narrative context. This is why semioticians have failed in

attempts to find general rules of interpretation for conventions of editing: "The primacy of context gives codes a marginal quality and allows them to fluctuate with relative impunity." (78) Messaris next refers to research showing that even for first- or second-time viewers, analytic editing is "close enough to everyday visual experience so as not to be an obstacle to interpretation." (83) Those for whom "empiricism" is anathema should rest assured that Messaris is subtle in evaluating and interpreting the quantitative research to which he refers.

If the book has any weakness, it is that Messaris's conception of comprehension in visual literacy is narrow. It is as though he believes that any visual communication, by dint of its visuality, is both automatically and easily understood. It may be that viewers need no visual literacy to comprehend simple sequences of the type found in classical Hollywood cinema or simple television advertisements, but an understanding of Fellini's *8½* certainly requires more than everyday perceptual and cognitive skills. Similarly, any inexperienced viewer can comprehend the meaning of Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* on the level of a simple adventure and revenge story, but most viewers miss the visual metaphors and icons, and the film's significance as a revisionist Western. In other words, we need either to enlarge Messaris's notion of comprehension to include more difficult material than he covers, or to more clearly admit that visual literacy is only one of many "literacies" required for a full comprehension of many visual texts.

Some will say that Messaris's emphasis on the naturalistic basis of film perception constitutes "naive realism" on his part, and plays into the false notion that films are transparent copies or imitations of reality. But such is not the case. If the public believes that "images do not lie," this reinforces Messaris's argument that "the interpretation of pictures is based on the same kinds of information cues that viewers employ in making sense of real-world vision." (167) As Messaris points out, "an image can give a fake or misleading picture of reality yet remain faithful to the principles by which reality is apprehended." (167) I would argue that no accurate account of visual communication can *ignore* homologies between film perception and everyday perception. As Messaris has convincingly shown, visual images and edited films are simultaneously both imitative *and* transformative. Their imitative aspect is precisely what leads some viewers to overlook their artifice, and to refuse or ignore their deeper meanings and manipulations. This is the most compelling argument for visual "literacy."

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THE MOVIES: A CENTENNIAL ISSUE

EDITED BY LAURENCE GOLDSTEIN AND IRA KONIGSBERG

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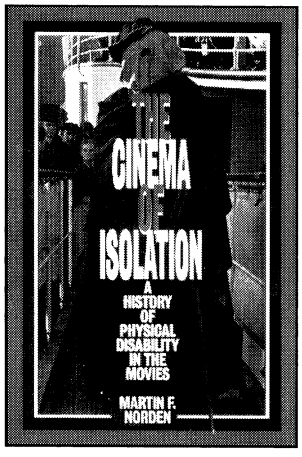

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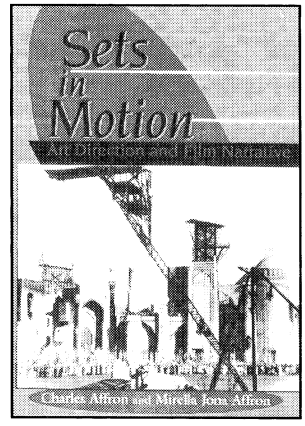

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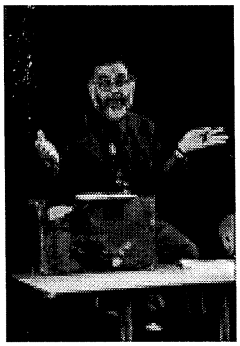

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